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SENTINEL in the SADDLE

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LLOID AND JUANITA JONES

In the stock-growing West, the " Government hunter " is a highly valued citizen, if not a common one. His work demands daring yet patience, scientific knowledge and imagination, lightning reflexes and lasting endurance, tact to meet people, and courage to meet beasts of prey.

When Marsh Temple graduates from high school, he discovers that he has a gift for reading signs and a taste for adventure. Yet he has many conflicts before he can decide whether Government hunting is the life for him. After all, it does take high courage to embark on a career so very different from those of any of his friends or classmates. His difficulty in making up his mind as to what he wants to do in life has him

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down, uncertain and discouraged. Gus Garver, the neighborhood's "living answer to the call of the wild," is a better woodsman, but without guidance or purpose. A feud develops between Gus and Marsh as Marsh starts on his new and exciting work. He becomes more and more eager to make a success of his job as he sees how much it means to the men making a living ranching.

In this story you will share the thrills of hunting mountain lion, coyote, and bobcat, matching wits not only with these wild creatures but also with the humans who complicate Marsh's struggle to find himself and to prove his ability in the wilds.

Stern determination on Marsh's part, constant understanding support from his family, and the comradely assistance of his twin, Marlou, help him to prove himself against man and beast, and put him on the right track to his future.

SENTINEL
in the
SADDLE

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LLOID *and* JUANITA JONES

Illustrated by W. H. Wickham

THE JUNIOR LITERARY GUILD
and
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To the Steadfast Men
of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service,
and Especially to Government Hunters
Louis E. Miller
and
Marsh Williams
who can read their own sign in this story,
this book is respectfully dedicated

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ONE hand keeping the reins taut, eyes constantly scanning the sagebrush ahead for coyotes, Marsh Temple held Oatbin to a fiddle-footed walk. The golden horse snorted in disgust. The sound, Marsh thought, expressed something of his own frame of mind.

Since sunup he had ridden the mountainous outlying pastures of the big sheep ranch, and now, at nine o'clock, he was still empty-handed. His whole life, it seemed, had got to a sort of aimless circling in a fruitless hunt for something that apparently wasn't there.

On a rise not far from the state highway, he pulled up and sat looking out across the tumbled expanse of the Chiricahua Basin. Three weeks of April sun had half cleared the nearby ground of snow. Back beyond, where the reaching hills lifted to Holystone and the other peaks of the Oroblanco Range, the high slopes still glittered, unbroken arctic white.

Absently Marsh noted a pickup truck top the hill and roll down the highway — somebody who, no doubt, knew where he was going and what he wanted to do; somebody who, at least, wasn't just filling in a Saturday with hunting, out of a liking for horses and guns, and the need to

feel he was usefully occupied.

At that moment, Marsh glimpsed a mere flick of tawny form sliding among the gray-green sage, a coyote close to the road disturbed by the oncoming truck. The boy swung forward in the saddle, sweeping his .22 rifle from its leather boot. At the movement, Oatbin leaped into an understanding run. Despite his humorous nickname, the horse was a smart, fast palomino of highly dignified ancestry.

The coyote, as coyotes will, stopped briefly to look back at the truck. Then it started trotting, unalarmed, up the slope at an angle away from the road. The angle turned it to face the thundering horse and rider, and in sudden wild panic the little wolf whirled and shot away from there with an almost audible zip.

Marsh swung Oatbin across the slope to cut it off. The animal tore headlong down a shallow swale that went under the highway farther on in a culvert. Marsh knew Oatbin couldn't hold the pace long. A short fifty yards behind the coyote he dropped the looped reins to the saddle horn. Given his head, Oatbin stretched himself in one final burst. Forty yards, thirty-five, thirty, twenty-five . . .

Marsh rose in the saddle, riding his stirrups high and smooth. He pointed the rifle without bringing it to his shoulder and measured out two shots. At the third shot the coyote gave a prodigious leap and came down rolling, somersaulting end over end. Marsh eased back in the saddle and let Oatbin slow himself down, and took a wide circle to return to the sprawled, limp carcass. There he refilled the magazine of his little gun with shells from his chaps pocket.

" Did you get him, fella? "

Only then did Marsh notice that the pickup had

parked beside the highway. A man came hurrying across the flat. Oh-oh, Marsh thought. Some out-of-season tourist wanting a Wild West snapshot. He stepped around his horse, his shoulders wide, his lean waist held stiffly.

" I got it," he answered briefly.

The man was a trifle shorter than Marsh's five-ten, and a bit wider, but he was no tourist. His tanned face was open and friendly, and he was dressed for range work in jeans and flannel shirt, half boots, Stetson, and leather jacket.

" I've been around at the takin' of a few coyotes," he said, " but that's the second time in my life I ever saw one shot from a runnin' horse."

" I've got five this way in the last month and a half," Marsh stated with some pride. " You ride high and keep the gun away from you, to lessen the jolt." Then he happened to notice the side of the truck:

" U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Predatory animal trapper."

" Oh-oh! " he exclaimed. " Look who's talking! "

The man laughed. " Woodford's the name. W. L. Woodford. I'm the Government hunter from Hardscrabble."

Marsh extended his hand. " I'm Marshall Temple, Mr. Woodford."

" Call me Woody; everybody does. Is the Middlesworth ranch near here? "

" This is part of it," Marsh told him. " I live in town, but I've been hunting coyotes for the Middlesworths in my spare time. They pay me a bounty equal to what I can sell the pelts for. There's another fellow working the place on the same basis, with steel traps."

" Do you know if Mr. Middlesworth is at home? "

Marsh nodded. " I'll go up to the house with you if you like. I can turn my horse into the next pasture, if you have room in the truck for my saddle."

" Fine," said the hunter. " I'll take this pelt while you unsaddle. Seems to be a nice one, even though it's late in the season." As they climbed into the truck, Woody said, " A man named Temple publishes the *Chiricahua Weekly Tribune*." He pronounced it Sha-RIK-a-haw, like a native.

Marsh said: " That's my father. He ran some stories in the paper about the unusual amount of trouble with coyotes this spring, and then the forest ranger told Mr. Middlesworth where to write to reach the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hunters."

The sturdy truck took the heavy grade up Mill Creek, and shortly they arrived at the Middlesworth home. The rambling log ranch house was snugly located at the head of a large meadow along the valley of Mill Creek, and was surrounded by the long, low sheds and the maze of corrals that go with the sheep business.

A Mexican was at work in one of the corrals, but no one else was in sight. Woody stopped the truck, and Marsh called, " Where is Señor Middlesworth, Felipe? "

" At the lambing shed up in the west pasture," the man replied.

They drove on, over a rugged ranch road, for another two miles.

At sound of the truck, Mr. Middlesworth emerged from the temporary shelter made of corrugated iron sheets. Marsh introduced Woody to the square-set, powerfully muscled rancher.

" I'm mighty glad to see you," Mr. Middlesworth said fervently. " Coyotes have been taking as high as twenty

per cent of the lambs from some bands this spring. We've strung lanterns on poles at night, and I've put on extra men — a herder for every hundred ewes — and we still lose."

"I got a copy of your letter to the Denver office," Woody nodded. "The district supervisor asked me to come over and see what I could do. This is 'way out of my regular territory, but we always try to give help where predatory animal trouble is reported to us."

"We'll certainly appreciate anything you can do," the gray-haired rancher said. "Marsh has been hunting coyotes, and another young fellow named Gus Garver has been trapping the place. It all helps, but I guess it isn't enough. The coyotes seem to be extra thick and hungry this year."

"Some years are like that," Woody nodded. "Trouble is, the district supervisor says he doesn't have a man available to send you right now. I'm so far away I can't do you much good, though I could make some sets around the place today."

"By sets," Marsh asked, "do you mean steel traps?"

"Not for the most part. Mainly we use cyanide guns — what we call 'coyote getters,' or just 'gitters.' But they need lookin' after if you're to get the most benefit from 'em."

Mr. Middlesworth said, "Even if the situation's not a hundred per cent right, I still wish you'd do what you can."

"It wouldn't," ventured Marsh, "be something I could take care of, would it? After school and on Saturdays?"

The hunter looked at him thoughtfully. "I'd have to leave you some Government equipment to replace what's

used up. I don't know. I've never turned stuff over to anybody that way before. I'm responsible for how it's used."

"You'll find Marsh strictly reliable," Mr. Middlesworth said. "I'll vouch for him, quite apart from the fact that I need protection so bad. But if you think he could learn the procedure, I'll pay him for his time."

"Marsh has had some experience with predatory animals," Woody reflected. "And he knows his way around outdoors. I expect I could show him enough to do some good. It's only this matter of responsibility for Government property."

"I'd be glad to assume responsibility for Marsh's use of equipment," offered Mr. Middlesworth. "Post a bond, if necessary. 'Most anything to put a stop to these losses."

"I guess that's the decidin' factor — the sheep you're losin'." Woody seemed to reach a decision. "It's not Service policy to let anybody not under Service supervision use our equipment, but it's also Service policy to protect stock if at all possible, and I guess this is one of those cases where I'll have to use my own judgment. So if you're willin' to offer your services, Marsh — "

"I'm continuing to pay you, Marsh," repeated Mr. Middlesworth. "Whatever you get from Ivan Wagner for the pelts you take, I'll match as a bounty."

Woody shook his head. "Any pelts taken with Government equipment have to be turned over to the Service. They're all shipped in to headquarters and sold at public auction. But Marsh, not bein' a Government employee, would be free to take whatever you pay him to help you."

"We could get Mr. Wagner to estimate the value of the skins," Marsh suggested quickly. "I'd be glad to go

ahead on that basis, Mr. Middlesworth." He felt a great relief that he had not needed to explain his large amount of free time. This work wasn't finding his place in the world, of course, but it didn't sound too much like a mere odd job, either.

Woody was spreading out a sheet of paper on the truck fender. " We have a form for you to fill out, Mr. Middlesworth."

Marsh got a look at the blank. It stated, after it was filled in, that at the request of Calvin Middlesworth, Government Hunter W. L. Woodford was placing traps and cyanide guns for the control of predatory animals on his property, and that he assumed responsibility for any accidents that might occur.

" We'll post signs," Woody added, " but actually there's very little danger of accidents. Marsh can report the locations of the sets to you so that your herders can keep their dogs out of that vicinity."

Mr. Middlesworth signed quickly. " Don't worry about that. After the losses I've had this spring, I'd accept even more liability, if necessary. And I appreciate your part too, Marsh." To the hunter he said, " Mrs. Middlesworth and I think a great deal of Marsh."

" Well, fella;" Woody smiled at Marsh, " how'd you like to learn a little of the trapper's trade? "

" Where do we start? " Marsh asked eagerly. Mr. Middlesworth returned to the lambing shed, and Marsh joined Woody and climbed onto the pickup's cargo deck. Immediately, his interest was absorbed.

Built across the body of the truck against the back of the cab were two padlocked tool chests, one in front of the other. The chests were neatly stacked with all sorts

of gear. Marsh could identify only the steel traps.

" Cryin' out loud! " he exclaimed. " You're really set up for business, aren't you? "

" This is my job," Woody said. " I try to do it the best I can."

There you had it, Marsh thought. A man who knew his purpose in life, and equipped himself to accomplish it! But how did you find your purpose?

Woody sorted gear into two khaki packsacks — traps and chains and a hammer, and what looked to Marsh like odds and ends of metal tubing, and a square can that had once held floor wax. They swung down, and Marsh shrugged one of the sacks to his shoulder, surprised at its clanking weight. Woody reached into the truck cab.

" You know," said Marsh, " my dad would sure like to get a story for the newspaper — Man, what a rifle you've got there! "

Woody handed the boy a gun he had taken from a rack above the seat. " Three hundred caliber with a four-power scope sight. I use a 150-grain cartridge, so when I zero in a target on those cross hairs I stop it, no matter how big."

Marsh fondled the weapon admiringly before he reluctantly handed it back. He didn't bother to get his own puny .22 from the truck where he had put it with his saddle.

" I want to stop and talk with your dad," Woody said, as they started walking up the hill toward the pasture fence. " If he'd care to print an article explainin' how we work in a situation like this, it would help clear up questions."

" I'm sure he would," said Marsh. " And my sister — she's preparing for a newspaper career — will want to in-

terview you and get a picture, and play up the human-interest angles."

They bent to get through the strands of a barbed-wire fence and Woody stopped. " We'll get coyote here," he said.

Marsh looked around at the boulder-strewn slope, the scattered trees, the gravelly draw they were following, and shook his head. How did Woody know? The slope seemed like almost any south slope of a mountain, with a thin stand of tannish wheat grass, an occasional clump of pin oak or pine or aspen, and the usual assortment of red and blue flowers.

Woody grinned. " A coyote hunter has to make like the village idiot that found the stray horse. None of the normal folks could locate the horse, but the idiot got to thinkin' about where he'd go if he was a horse. He went there, and there was the horse."

Marsh laughed. " Where would I go if I was a coyote? "

" If you were a coyote," Woody replied, " you'd be comin' along down this swale, huntin' in a circle, coyote fashion. You'd stop to pick up the neighborhood coyote gossip at that scent post yonder." He pointed to a lone sagebrush growing on a bare spot of ground, slightly withered and discolored at the base. " Same as the fire plug to a city dog. When you started on, you'd smell mutton, and slip under the fence."

From one of the packsacks Woody took a hollow steel tube the size of a double-length cigar, drove it into the ground, and attached two small mechanisms. " There's your cyanide gun," he said. " Now step back a little, upwind, and I'll show you how she works."

He reached out with pliers and gingerly took hold of the tube top. A couple of firm tugs upward and there was

a report, as of a gun. A fine white mist drifted off on the breeze. Woody stepped back and let out his held-in breath.

" Well, that's it," he said. " Lackin' pliers, Mr. Coyote grabs that plug in his teeth, yanks it, and gets his mouth shot full of sodium cyanide salts. He lives from five to fifteen seconds, and Mr. Middlesworth's sheep live to go to market. That's a coyote getter, or, to us trappers, a ' gitter.' Here, you set one. We'll make a circle of 'em."

Marsh measured the arc with his eye and moved to the fence, trying to remember the procedure. He was on his knees with the hammer when a new voice spoke gruffly,

" What's all the shootin', Marsh? "

Marsh looked up. " Hi, Gus. Get off your horse and come here. You'll get a ping out of this."

He waited while tall, bulky Gus Garver slid from the battered saddle of his rough-coated pinto, moving with the soft, rolling tread of an Indian. Indeed, with his oily skin and the stained buckskin smock he wore in place of a shirt, he might have been taken for an Indian except for the bush of dull red hair showing under his old Stetson.

" Woody," said Marsh, " this is Gus Garver. He and I used to go to grade school together. This is Mr. Woodford, the Government hunter from Hardscrabble."

" Hello, Gus." Woody extended his hand, which Gus met for a limp second without raising his quick-moving, light brown eyes. " I hear you do some trappin'."

" I've took a few plews," growled Gus. He habitually spoke from deep in his heavy chest, a defiant grumble as though he found the world unfriendly. " That one o' them fur gitters, Marsh? "

" Woody calls it a ' gitter,' " Marsh nodded. " You

ever use 'em, Gus? "

" Wouldn't have one o' the blasted things," rumbled Gus. Short on vocabulary, he was long on profanity. " Regular cussed booby trap. No tellin' what you'll kill off. Stock or anythin'."

Woody laughed. " Those old stories still goin' around? These things were first used back in 1933. Called fur getters to begin with. I guess they had some trouble developin' the right mechanism, and at first used too much powder. But no more. The Government cartridges are charged at our laboratory in Pocatello, Idaho, and in twelve years with the Service I've never got a cow or sheep yet."

Gus turned to Marsh. " Middlesworth turnin' all his coyote-huntin' over to you? "

" Why," said Marsh, " not that I know of." He explained the agreement he had made with the sheepman. " I don't see why you shouldn't go ahead as you were."

" Seems to be plenty coyotes for all," said Woody. " I've noticed signs of two or three along here, one that was carryin' a lamb out of the pasture."

" You mean you could tell that from the tracks? " demanded Marsh.

" There's four coyotes use this draw regular," Gus said heavily. " Twenty-eight or twenty-nine that hunt this ranch off and on. I know where their dens are too, over on another ranch, but that guy Ledington won't let me on the place. What galls me is that Marsh can't even read sign, but Middlesworth calls in help to make sure he gets the most fur."

The words roused quick anger in Marsh. " I thought you wouldn't use gitters. If you want the job of looking after 'em, apply for it."

Gus sidled toward the shaggy pinto. "My old man ain't got any drag, and as news I ain't worth a dime. I'm no local football hero."

Marsh flushed. True, Gus didn't have anyone to back him. But it was also true that you couldn't explain anything to him.

Gus swung to the saddle. "When people find out you're plantin' the country with explosives, you ain't gonna be such all-fired big potatoes." He reined the pinto around and eased off up the draw in a soft canter.

"I don't believe that guy likes you," Woody said dryly.

Marsh set another gitter, and presently they moved on across the mountain to a junction of two small trails. By two o'clock they had set twenty gitters and five steel traps.

"If you're ready to go to town," Woody said, "I'll drive you in and have a talk with your dad."

Marsh left Oatbin in the pasture. The drive down Mill Creek and then along the highway beside the Chiricahua River took only half an hour. They curved across the river bridge and entered the wide, cottonwood-shaded streets.

"That brown stucco building on the hill is County High," Marsh said. "Five more weeks, and they'll be done with me for good."

Woody asked, "Then what?"

Marsh looked straight ahead, feeling his neck grow warm. "I don't know." Well, it was out. "My sister wants to enter Colorado University in the fall, but I'm not so good at the books."

"So what?" chuckled the hunter. "If you can cut back over tackle —"

Marsh shook his head. "Not worth the English and history," he said, wishing he'd avoided this. "Science and

math are not so bad. I'd still be nothing but a big, dumb athlete, and not even very big." He grinned feebly, hoping that what he had said would pass for a joke. It seemed he couldn't talk to anybody lately without this question of the future coming up, and yet it was only natural that people should be interested when they knew you were practically through high school. He changed the subject. " You can see the ranger station from here."

" Always tell that tan-and-brown paint job," nodded Woody.

" County Courthouse in the square," Marsh went on. " Back along that side street is Taylor's Feed Store, and beyond it the Wagner Wool and Hide Company. It's Mr. Wagner that's buying the pelts Gus and I take."

" He won't miss your business," said Woody. " Nobody gettin' rich in the natural-fur trade these days." They moved slowly along the " black-top " pavement between the rows of two-story brick business buildings. Sidewalks bustled with men and women and children, most of them clad in jeans and boots and high-crowned Western hats, and about them all was the look of sun and clean wind and uncrowded living. Their pickups and cars were parked in a double line down the middle of the street.

" That's the *Tribune* Building, next door to the furniture store," Marsh said.

Woody nosed his vehicle into a space in the center parking. They crossed to the sidewalk. Inside the cluttered newspaper office a girl turned from a typewriter desk.

" Well, hi," she greeted Marsh. " Fancy meeting you here on a fine Saturday afternoon. Coyotes all lost their nerve? "

Marsh grinned and said to Woody: " This is the society editor, circulation manager, ad writer, et cetera, of the *Tribune.* Marcia Louise Temple, my sister."

" Twin," amended Marlou, smiling at Woody's startled look from her to Marsh.

" Mr. Woodford is the Government hunter Mr. Middlesworth wrote in for," Marsh said. " Need a good news story, Brain? Your father in? "

" He is," dimpled Marlou. " So's yours." She disappeared through a rear door into the composing room.

Mr. Temple came back with her. His eyes were a clear, friendly brown and his dark hair was beginning to show edges of gray.

" I appreciate your coming in," he said as he shook hands with the Government hunter. " Newspaper folks like to keep up with what goes on in the region."

" Are you going to move to Chiricahua, Mr. Woodford? " inquired Marlou, note pad and pencil ready. " And is there a Mrs. Woodford, and any little Woodfords? "

" Just my wife and me," Woody told the girl. " We won't be movin' into the Basin." He explained the conditions under which he was working with Mr. Middlesworth. " Marsh has agreed to look after my sets for me between trips, providin', I suppose, there's no objection."

Marsh looked quickly at his father. " Mr. Middlesworth will keep on paying me the value of the skins," he said, trying to make his father see it was still a job, sort of.

" If you want to do it, Marsh," said Mr. Temple. " I'm glad to have you help out a neighbor."

Marsh tried unsuccessfully to measure the extent of approval in the words.

" What about Gus Garver? " asked Marlou, always

quick to see the human angles.

" Gus wasn't any too happy," Marsh answered.

" This will give Gus something to growl about," Mr. Temple observed.

" No doubt he's picked up a lot of nature lore," said Woody, " but not as much as he thinks. The Fish and Wildlife Service is not strong on the Garvers. I'd a lot rather have Marsh tendin' my sets. Somebody that can and will learn."

" Make a note of that, Brain," Marsh told his sister, " and noise it around at school, will you? "

" Do you have a ranch at Hardscrabble? " Marlou asked Woody.

" Oh, no." The hunter smiled. " I'm a full-time trapper, under Civil Service. If a man studied hard all his life, and lived to be old, he might begin to know a little about trappin'."

The front door opened and a man entered, followed by his wife, a wind-browned and weary-faced woman, and then by a girl in her early teens and a boy somewhat younger. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, lithe, in the prime of life.

" Hello, John," Mr. Temple said cordially. " How's everything on Short Crick? "

" So-so, George." The visitor cuffed back his Stetson to reveal a high, fine forehead and deep-set eyes of a dark blue that might see visions and dream dreams. " That young dog I've been training to drive cattle has strayed again, and I want to advertise for him."

Mr. Temple laughed. " That pooch is certainly a vagabond at heart, isn't he? Mr. Woodford, I'd like you to know Mr. Ledington. And Mrs. Ledington, Louise, and John Junior. Mr. Woodford is a Government hunter,

with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

" I noticed your truck," said John Ledington. " Do you expect to start working the Chiricahua Basin? "

Woody shook his head.

" Meaning no discourtesy," Mr. Ledington said, " I'm glad to hear that. I'm opposed to unrestricted hunting and trapping."

" Why, so am I," agreed Woody. " We operate with the latest techniques under careful regulation."

" Even so," Mr. Ledington said, " I'd not like to see large-scale killing of wild animals started here because Cal Middlesworth has lost some sheep."

" Cryin' out loud! " exclaimed Marsh, his amazement bursting through restraint. " What's wrong with killing off coyotes? "

" A good many things," answered Mr. Ledington. " For one, the coyote is a scavenger, cleaning up dead carcasses and refuse. For another, he is a rodent control agent. Raising cultivated crops would be very difficult without him, for his chief food is rabbits, field mice, and wood rats."

" Also sheep, poultry, and other domestic stock," Mr. Temple added.

" Naturally. You can't expect a wild animal to distinguish." Mr. Ledington warmed to his subject. " But people who depend on nature for a living ought to be glad to give something back to nature. Because they haven't, this country is fast squandering its natural resources, and wildlife is an important natural resource. Why should a sheepman have Government protection from natural losses? If the Government kills off coyotes to protect my neighbor's sheep, it will soon have to kill off jack rabbits to protect my lettuce crop. Finally — "

" Finally," finished Mr. Temple, " we give up and let

nature take its course. I know the theory, John, and there's something to it, but it might take fifty years to achieve the proper balance of nature in this Basin."

" Then the first long spell of unusual weather would upset it," Woody added. " The research men tell us there's not much connection between rodent cycles and predatory animals. In other words — "

" I still don't want any of your traps on my place," cut in Ledington, and thick silence settled over the office.

" Is this about what you want in your ad for the dog, Mr. Ledington? " Marlou asked presently.

The rancher read quickly, and said, " That'll be fine, Marlou." He paid for the ad and left, his family following him out.

" Well," said Woody, " that's an argument we don't often hear."

Mr. Temple said, " John has to have a cause to espouse and it usually is conservation, in some phase."

" I have miles to drive," Woody put in. " Marsh, I'll leave you some supplies to use until I get back."

" Drive over to the house," Mr. Temple suggested. " Mom would like to meet Mr. Woodford, Marsh."

" O.K.," Marsh agreed, but he found his enthusiasm considerably weakened. He couldn't seem to get Mr. Ledington off his mind.

The Temple home was a white frame bungalow set in half an acre of yard. As Marsh and Woody drove in, Mrs. Temple came out to the truck.

" Marlou just briefed me by phone," she told her son. " Could you be persuaded to have supper with us, Mr. Woodford? "

The hunter smiled down at her from the truck. " Thank you, but I think I'd better get started."

" Then bring him in for a cup of coffee, Marsh, as soon as you get through here," said Mrs. Temple. " No one should ever start anywhere in this country without a cup of coffee first."

" O.K., Mom," said Marsh, and found himself smiling too. Mom was gray-haired, and comfortable, and yet had a zip in her manner that never failed to make everything seem right. He took the ex-floor-wax can from Woody. " Get a load of this, Mom." He unscrewed the cap and held it out.

" Mercy! " cried Mrs. Temple, clutching her nose. " What in the world have you got there? "

" Coyote scent."

" Fish that have seen better days," said Woody. " This was made from sardines, ground up and left out in the sun for a week."

" Is Marsh to spread it around? When the coyotes get a whiff of it do they run for their lives? "

" Believe it or not," said Marsh, " I smear this on a cyanide gun and it tempts the coyote to pull it and shoot himself."

" I don't wonder," declared Mrs. Temple, and went in to see to the coffee.

After a few minutes of unloading Woody said: " I guess that will do it, Marsh. You have extra gitters, spare cartridges, traps, and scent. I'll try to get back in a week or two."

They went into the house. Before the large north window in the living room Woody stopped short. A canvas mounted on an easel was colorful with a nearly completed scene of mountain and forest.

" Why, that's grand! " said the hunter. " Who did it? "

" That's my daubing," Mrs. Temple confessed. " As

long as it amuses both me and the children, I think it's harmless."

" It certainly looks real," said Woody. " I could imagine a bear comin' along and tearin' that old log apart for grubs."

Marsh and his mother stood on the porch as his truck rolled away. " Well," said Mrs. Temple, " from your talk I gather you've found a kind of work you really like."

" Oh, I like hunting," Marsh admitted. " Still — " He searched for words to say what he was really thinking, and could not find them. " If there's going to be trouble between Mr. Middlesworth and John Ledington," he finally said, " I don't want to be caught in it."

Mom looked at him thoughtfully. " School will be out soon. If there seems to be a feud brewing, you can go back to Goodhues' and work on the ranch again this summer."

" I suppose so. But I wouldn't care for ranching as a permanent thing. Right now I guess I better go sort out that stuff Woody left me, and put it away."

He went down the steps and around to an unused chicken house where he and Woody had put the hunting gear. Which got him, he thought, out of further discussion of his future, but brought him no nearer to peace of mind.

2

THE sun was only a vast saffron canopy behind Escarpment Ridge next morning when Marsh rose. He was in the kitchen trying to manipulate the percolator without clatter when his father came in.

" This I gotta see," grinned Mr. Temple. " When you roll out before sunup, there must be some excitement. I'm going along."

They drove out of town in the first slanting light, glad for the heater in the car and for sheep-lined coats, those early cups of coffee a grateful memory. In the Basin, the April morning " zephyr " came whistling down off the snow-capped Candelabra Needles at twenty degrees below freezing.

Only a workman or two was stirring around the Middlesworth place as the car drove up to the west pasture lambing shed. They waved to the sleepy-looking herder who had been up taking care of the night's drop of lambs and made their way on to the fence. Marsh took from the car's trunk the sack of equipment Woody had left him.

" So these are the warning signs you were telling me about," Mr. Temple said, stopping before the square cloth tacked to a fence post.

Warning — Cyanide Cartridges — Poison

Poisonous cyanide cartridges are being used in this locality for the control of coyotes. Danger — Do not touch or remove these cartridges — Tampering with them in any manner may set them off and cause serious or fatal injury. Owners of dogs are urged to keep them away. Removing or interfering with these devices is unlawful. Persons committing such acts will be dealt with to the fullest extent of the law. The co-operation of the public is solicited in this effort to protect livestock and game, which is being made under the direction of the

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" Also repeated in Spanish for the benefit of Mexican sheepherders," Marsh pointed out. *" Aviso — Cartuchos de Cianuro — Veneno Cartuchos de cianuro venenoso — "*

" You speak good Spanish, Marsh," his father interrupted. " Sometimes I wonder why you insist you're a poor student."

" I can roll this stuff off because I've been around the Diazes and Felipe and people like that, not because I struggled through Spanish I and Spanish II." He led the way off the trail along an unmarked, seemingly aimless path around boulders and underbrush. " Here! " He stopped suddenly. " See this little gismo sticking up? It's a gitter."

" That little plug the size of my thumb? " demanded Mr. Temple. " I don't see how you could remember

where you put it, in a stretch of country like this."

Marsh said reflectively: " I think it's easier to remember things outdoors. It's fired! " he exclaimed suddenly. " Woody said a coyote usually runs off uphill after pulling a gitter." He started up the little draw at a run. Before he had gone forty yards, he stopped to shout back triumphantly: " Here's the carcass. Cryin' out loud! A take the first night on the first set! That Woody knows his stuff."

He took the pelt, reloaded the gitter with a fresh cartridge, smeared the flannel wrapping with the revolting scent, and led off along the fence. Near a gitter on the east end of the place they found another kill.

Mr. Temple was impressed. " This seems like an awfully good percentage to me."

They found no more gitters fired, but on the south, where the heavy stand of fir reached up from the river, they found one of the traps Woody had located. It was sprung, and empty.

" What do you suppose goes on here? " said Marsh.

" Maybe it just slipped," Mr. Temple suggested.

Marsh examined the set carefully. " I don't think so. There're scratches in the ground, hard as it's frozen, and the strychnine pellet's gone from the trap jaw. Some animal was caught and died here. I don't see how it got away."

Marsh reset the trap, but he couldn't get out of his mind the puzzle of what had become of his prey. They finally stopped at the ranch house to find Mr. Middlesworth on his way to the sheds.

" How's this? " demanded Marsh, displaying the two pelts.

" Now that's all right," Mr. Middlesworth approved.

" Two sheep killings that already have been kept from happening. That man Woody said you'd take right ahold, Marsh." The rancher turned to Mr. Temple. " You're never going to make a newspaperman out of that boy, George."

Marsh looked uncomfortably at his father.

If Mr. Temple felt disappointment, he managed to hide it. " It's not a matter of what I make out of him, Cal. It's what he makes out of himself."

There it was again. Marsh maneuvered the conversation back to the trap line. " If I'd got here earlier, I might have had three pelts instead of two." He told Mr. Middlesworth of the sprung trap.

" We can figure we got three," Mr. Middlesworth said with satisfaction.

But Marsh could not rid himself of an uneasy feeling that the loss might have been due to some oversight on his part.

Next morning at breakfast, he announced he was going to call at the Wagner Wool and Hide Company before school, to sell the pelt he had taken Saturday and to get a valuation on the two taken with Government gitters.

" I don't understand that," said Marlou as she buttered her toast. " What does Mr. Wagner get for his trouble, except your friendly boyish grin? "

" There's so little money in furs," Mr. Temple observed, " he probably handles pelts as a gesture of good will. The profitable part of his business is the wool he buys from sheep ranchers."

" I'm not asking for any gesture of good will," said Marsh, starting for the door. " I expect to pay an appraisal fee."

The Wagner Wool and Hide Company was a large warehouse walled and roofed with galvanized iron. There came to Marsh's nostrils as he stepped up to the planked loading platform the powerful but not unpleasant odor of the place, a combination of curing hides and naphthalene. The business held an important place in the ranch country, for here the skin of an animal dead from natural causes could be sold for five or ten dollars to retrieve a little of the loss.

The office was pleasantly paneled in fiberboard, and furnished with a highly polished desk and two filing cabinets, almost odorless, and immaculate. Ivan Wagner rose from the desk.

" You're out early, Marsh." The words were as carefully formal as the man's well-pressed dark business suit. Always the first thing anybody remarked about Ivan Wagner was his spotlessness in this rather smelly and messy trade, the trimness with which he carried his forty or so years, the complete lack of gray in his very black, very straight hair. But this morning there was a chill in his tone as noticeable as the sharpness of the high-country morning outside.

" I've got three coyote pelts on the platform," Marsh said. " One I shot, and want to sell. Two I took with this stuff the Government hunter put out, so I can't sell 'em; but Mr. Middlesworth will pay me what they're worth if you'll set a value on 'em. I'll pay you an appraisal fee." It sounded, he thought, businesslike.

" Pelts taken by the Government," Ivan Wagner said harshly, " as far as I am concerned, are not worth that." He snapped his fingers.

Marsh batted his eyes in bewilderment.

" You don't need to worry about coyote pelts anyway,"

Wagner went on. " Before long there won't be any, now that Middlesworth has got the Government hunters started in here."

Marsh said: " Far as I know there won't be any hunter in here. Mr. Middlesworth got this man from Hardscrabble just to help cut down his sheep losses."

" Cal's lost some mutton," nodded the fur dealer, " and he says it's coyotes. If the truth was known, I'd bet good money most of his coyotes walk on two legs and speak Spanish."

" You mean the sheepherders? " exclaimed Marsh, his astonishment growing.

Wagner smiled without amusement. " It comes hard, learning what people are really like, doesn't it? Yet you can understand how a sheepman, if he could manage it, wouldn't have a living thing on the range except sheep — not so much as a wood tick. Which suits these control people exactly. As fast as they can control the coyote out of existence, they can move in to control the rabbits and ground squirrels and gophers. So they always have a job. It's a vicious business. I'd advise you to get out of it."

Marsh went out and picked up his pelts, carried them home, and went to school in a brown study. He found it hard to keep his mind on the day's classroom work. Repeatedly he caught himself looking absently out the window, speculating on why Ivan Wagner should have such a hatred against Government hunting. In study hall he got to wrangling with the problem of the empty trap again, instead of the equation for neutralizing nitric acid.

" Marshall Temple."

He jerked to attention and walked to the teacher's desk.

" You are wanted in Room 105," said Miss Brown, signing a pass slip.

Marsh walked relievedly down the hall. There was no class in 105, only some of the newspaper staff working on the senior edition.

" Don't *do* these things," Marsh admonished everyone in the newspaper room. " You had me expecting trouble."

" You've got a guilty conscience," Bill Goodhue said, looking up from his sports page layout. " I suspected it all along." Marsh " frogged " Bill's upper arm companionably. They could razz each other, these two, for during the past three seasons County High's chief scoring threat in football had been Marsh Temple cutting back over right tackle, with Goodhue smashing ahead at the front of the interference.

" I'm the one that wants to see you," said pert, blond Diane Ringland. " Marlou's assigned me the ' Where Will Seniors Be Next Fall? ' column. Shall I put you down for Harvard or for Yale? "

Marsh groaned. " As if I had to leave the state to flunk, even if I was wealthy, which I'm not. For cryin' out loud, Diane, I don't know what you'd better put for me! What've you got for everyone else? "

Diane showed him a list. Bill Goodhue, Colorado A. and M. College; Rosa Rapelli, rancher's wife (Mrs. Savvy Diaz; the big date — July 20) ; Marcia Louise Temple, University of Colorado. The list ranged from colleges to working on the family cattle ranch, to clerking in the Chiricahua hardware store.

" Marlou's been telling us how interested you are in this Government man's coyote gitters. Maybe we ought to put in the paper that you're going to be a wild bearded trapper," Diane said.

" I could think of worse fates," Marsh told her. " But

the Brain would have your scalp, and Dad and Mom would have mine. Listen, Diane, can't you use a little humor? Put down that I'm going to be a vagabond, or something like that."

"All the frosh will be hitting the dictionary to see what it means," Bill observed.

"So he ends up being educational," Diane nodded.

"Educational!" Marsh groaned. "Let me out of here!"

He returned to his seat in the study hall. Vagabond! Suppose Diane played it up seriously. It didn't seem so good now. He considered asking permission to go find her, but somehow he didn't want to open the subject again. He pondered her crack about the wild bearded trapper.

Woody was neither wild nor bearded. As a matter of fact, he was plenty scientific. Still, hunting and trapping seemed like something you'd do for fun, not a regular job like newspaper work or ranching. The kids would howl if you put down that you intended to become a trapper. The first person they'd think of would be Gus Garver.

Marsh, though, did not go in search of Diane. At the 3:30 bell he got out of the building with that speed which only experienced seniors achieve. Somebody brushed his arm as he sped down the front steps, and he looked around to see Marlou keeping pace with him.

"What gives?" he inquired. "Thought it was time for your daily Coke-and-gossip."

"I'm working," said the girl; "getting a story for the *Chiricahua Weekly Tribune.*"

"What man's bit whose dog now?"

"You." She dimpled at him. "I plan an exposé of the inner workings of a trap line. I'm going with you out to

Middlesworths'. Race you home."

Marsh sprang after her, and dug in his toes. He had no compunctions about beating her, for there had been a period of years not so long ago when she, growing earlier, as girls will, had regularly beaten him. Because she always outpaced him by a wide margin in school grades, he gave her the brotherly title of " Brain," and no quarter in any other friendly competition that arose. He burst into the house while Marlou was still coming through the gate. " Hi, Mom! " he shouted.

" Oh! " said Mrs. Temple from the kitchen in marked relief. " Then there isn't a tornado. How are my starved offspring? "

" Starved," Marlou panted. " What's available that's nourishing, like food? "

" The makings of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and plenty of milk."

" I came by to leave the car for Marsh," Mr. Temple said, entering in time to hear this, " but I could be persuaded to stay for a snack."

" Short orders at all hours," sighed Mom. " I should put up a sign."

Marsh inspected his sister as he ate. " You'll have to change clothes, Brain."

" You going along, Marlou? " Mr. Temple was surprised.

" I thought it would make a good story," Marlou said.

Her father nodded thoughtfully. " Many ranchers will be interested in a method to reduce predatory losses. For once you can include full technical details without boring your readers."

" Once the thing's fully understood," Marsh added, " maybe people like Mr. Ledington and Mr. Wagner will

get over their prejudice against it."

" Ivan? " asked Mr. Temple. " Is he anti? "

" Practically blew a fuse." Marsh recounted the conversation. " I got so anxious to get out of there, I forgot to sell him the pelt I shot. I can't figure why he got so steamed. Furs don't bring any money nowadays."

" Just because I haven't been pricing fur coats lately," said Mrs. Temple, " is no reason to think there still isn't money in pelts."

" The finished coats, I suppose, are still priced out of this world," Mr. Temple agreed. " Certainly you don't get that kind of money and the price of college for two out of a country newspaper."

Marsh said uncomfortably, " Maybe you ought to divide that college budget in half, the way my grades look, and put my half into a coat for Mom."

" Oh, pooh! " said Mom. " At my weight, I wouldn't look good in a fur coat anyway."

" Better than I'd look in college," Marsh persisted.

" Don't be noble, my twin," advised Marlou. " Mom'd have no use for half a fur coat, and I'm the selfish type. I'm going to C. U. next fall, even if I have to study. And, if I may remind you, it's getting late."

Marsh hurried down to his basement den for boots and jeans.

Once in the car and on the way, Marlou said, " You been neglecting your chemistry homework? "

" No more than usual," Marsh grinned.

" Then why the grand offer to forgo college? "

" I don't like school and I'm no good at it. So why should the folks pinch pennies to send me? "

" So what will you do instead? "

" Exactly," grunted Marsh.

" Still that." Marlou lapsed into silence.

As they left the highway and started the laborious second-gear climb up Mill Creek, Marlou continued: " You'd go out for sports, and athletes can always get jobs, so the folks wouldn't have to put out too much. Sample around among the courses and you'll probably find the answer."

Marsh snorted: " Wait tables, play football and basketball, and beat my so-called brains out over history and English. What sort of life is that for a man? "

" Name me six better ideas."

He said hopelessly, " It would please the folks, of course."

" Maybe," was her surprising answer. " Have they ever pushed you about going to college? "

They pulled into the Middlesworth yard, but did not stop, for they needed all the daylight that was left them. It was slow going with the sedan up to the west pasture.

" That's my first station," Marsh said, pointing. He jumped from the car and pulled his sack of equipment from the trunk.

Marlou followed him with notebook and pencil. " Mountainside, wouldn't you call it? "

He explained why the site had been chosen as he moved rapidly from gitter to gitter. She kept making notes.

" Here's one fired! " he exulted. He looked around, found the dead coyote, and set about taking the pelt. With practice he was getting faster with the knife.

They moved on to the second station, and here too found a coyote that would kill no more sheep.

" You'll work yourself out of a job at this rate," Marlou commented.

" Plenty more where these come from," he answered,

spreading scent on a fresh cartridge. " Dens are on Ledingtons' place, Gus says."

At the southeast corner of the place, farthest from the ranch house, he got a jolt. A gitter was fired, but though he searched the area minutely, he could find no predator's carcass. He went over the ground again, kicking through the sparse grasses, checking each sagebrush, widening his circle to a full quarter of a mile, even probing foolishly with a stick in the crusted drifts of snow. But there was no coyote.

" Maybe it missed," suggested Marlou.

Marsh shook his head. " Woody said there was no known instance of a coyote pulling a gitter and living."

" There has to be a first time for everything."

" I suppose so. Still — "

" Still what? "

" Gus talked as if I might kill stock or most anything. I hope it wasn't a sheep."

" There's no dead sheep around, either," Marlou pointed out. " Come on, Marsh. It's nearly dark, and I'm getting cold."

Marsh reloaded the gitter and moved on reluctantly. He wished again that Woody lived closer — to give advice when these things came up — or, better still, that the Government hunter were stationed permanently in the Basin. He began to wonder again what had happened at the trap he had found sprung and empty.

They came in sight of this trap, and Marsh leaped forward with an exclamation. Here was something new. The frozen carcass of a strange animal was lying across the trap, the fine fur ruffed in rage and the mask a savage snarl under tufted, pointed ears.

" A bobcat! " Marsh exclaimed. " Look at that pelt! "

" It's beautiful." Marlou stroked the heavy fur. " Wouldn't that gray overtone on the red-buff background make a gorgeous collar? It'd look wonderful on Mom, with what gray there is in her hair."

" It sure would." Marsh finished taking the pelt, and they started back for the car. " You see why I get such a ping out of this stuff? "

" I certainly do," Marlou admitted. " You never know what you'll find next, do you? Maybe this is what you're looking for."

" Trapping? " Marsh shifted his load of pelts to the other shoulder. " You wouldn't want a Gus Garver character in the family, would you? "

They stopped at the ranch to talk with Mr. and Mrs. Middlesworth.

" You've no idea what a help this is, Marsh," declared the rancher. " Our losses have been cut in half the last two nights."

" Are you still losing sheep? " Marsh exclaimed in surprise.

" After only forty-eight hours of gitters? " Mrs. Middlesworth smiled. " You certainly have faith in these methods."

" He's taking the presence of a coyote hereabouts as a personal insult," Marlou laughed.

Marsh grumbled, " Ivan Wagner and John Ledington are taking me as a personal insult," and related what the men had said.

Mr. Middlesworth looked thoughtful. " John is a man of strong convictions, but an open mind. I think he can disagree with you and still remain friends. I don't know about Ivan."

" Actually," said Mrs. Middlesworth, " nobody knows

much about Ivan. I'm surprised that this makes any difference to him at all. What do you suppose is behind it, Cal? "

Her husband shook his head. " Anyway, leave the skins here in one of the sheds, Marsh. Do you feel that two dollars apiece is a fair price for the work you put in on the trap lines? "

" Cryin' out loud! " said Marsh. " I didn't think — "

" Then that's settled." Mr. Middlesworth reached for his billfold.

" Twelve dollars in three days," said Marlou as they drove down the highway afterward. " I've seen fellows our age do worse by way of a job."

" Good pay for spare time," Marsh nodded. But he added regretfully: " It's fun, not work, though. Hunting is something you do for rabbits over the week end, or for deer the third week in October. You couldn't feel like a full-fledged citizen putting in all your time prowling the woods and hills. That went out with Buffalo Bill."

One thing about these full afternoons, though, Marsh reflected — they gave him little time to ponder his problems and suffer that all-adrift feeling.

That evening and next morning were crammed with homework, and by afternoon the opportunity to take his gitter pack and get out in the open gave him a real sense of liberation. He set out from the Middlesworth pasture whistling.

This day none of the gitters at the first station had been fired. Maybe, thought Marsh — quite inaccurately — the skinned carcasses of two coyotes nearby had warned their living relatives to stay away from this fence crossing.

At the second station he found a dead coyote, and was skinning it when a pickup jounced to a stop at the pasture

fence and two men stepped out, crossed between the barbed strands, and came toward him.

" Well, hello, Mr. Rapelli," Marsh cried, recognizing the man with Mr. Middlesworth. " I haven't seen you in a long time."

" Not since-a da state basketball torn-ment, ha? " Guido Rapelli was a big man, and handsome, with coal-black hair and flashing brown eyes. He laughed a great deal. " You make-a six baskets in six minutes agin, Marsh, and I drive-a to Denver agin to see you."

" Guido heard about these contraptions, Marsh," said Mr. Middlesworth, " and wants to know how they work. Will you show us? "

" Sure thing," Marsh answered, and led the way to the nearest gitter. " You see, it can't be fired unless it's pulled upward, and stock would have no interest in pulling it because of the scent that's smeared on it."

" By golly, that's-a slick, ha? " exclaimed Mr. Rapelli. " I'm-a gonna have Rosa fix-a me up da letter to these Fish and Wildlife people, mysal'. We been losing-a goats right and left. Some-a my best billy goats gone, just-a when these new dairy is coming in at Blanco and I got the best-a milk market since I started."

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh said. " Coyotes sure do a lot of damage in a ranch country, when you come to find out about it."

" You gotta way to keep-a da coyotes off-a people, you have-a everybody wanting you-a come out. Ha, Cal? "

" That's right," Mr. Middlesworth said. " A man that was good at it could always find work."

As they drove away, Marsh looked after the pickup with an increasing sense of excitement. Maybe . . . But

right now he had more sets to inspect, and not much time. He hurried on.

Twenty yards before he reached the first set along the east fence, he came to a stop, appalled. Stretched in the grass before him was the body of a nearly grown shepherd dog. Conspicuous on the black-and-white muzzle, the splashes of identifying yellow dye from a Government cyanide gun told all too clearly what had happened.

With a cold lump of sickness at the junction of his ribs, Marsh turned over the stiff body of the pup. It had a distinctive bib-shaped spread of white on its front. He did not need a collar and tag to know it was the roving dog for which John Ledington had advertised in the *Tribune*.

" Oh, brother! " Marsh groaned to himself. " What does Woody do in a case like this? "

For the first miserable minute or so the boy considered burying the carcass then and there. Mr. Ledington would doubtless conclude that the dog had wandered away for good. Nobody need know what had happened out here so far, and it seemed so unnecessary to stir up further antagonism from Mr. Ledington toward what Woody was doing because of the vagaries of one foolish young dog. How Gus Garver would rumble, " I told you so "!

At thought of Gus, Marsh straightened decisively. He lifted the dead dog to his shoulder with the coyote skin and turned straight toward the ranch house. Mr. Middlesworth saw him coming and walked out to meet him.

" It's that foot-loose pup of John Ledington's," Marsh said.

" Get in a trap? " asked Mr. Middlesworth.

Marsh shook his head. " Pulled a gitter. Makes you realize what a close relative of the dog the coyote is. No

wonder the signs make special mention of keeping dogs away. I'll take him over and explain to Mr. Ledington."

Mr. Middlesworth nodded. "Pay John whatever he thinks the dog was worth." He reached for his billfold and took out two tens and a five. "If that doesn't cover it, tell him I'll see him."

"He's not going to feel good about it," Marsh predicted.

"I want to do the fair thing," returned Mr. Middlesworth, a bit shortly, "and pay for the dog, but I'm not buying any of John's theories."

With a chilly premonition that there was going to be more to this than Mr. Middlesworth had any idea of, Marsh pocketed the money. Felipe drove him in the ranch pickup to get the Temple car from the pasture. Returning, he placed the body of the dog in the trunk and drove reluctantly down to the state highway. It was nearly ten miles from Middlesworths' around to Ledingtons' by road, but, as Mr. Ledington would see it, no harm would have come to the dog had it not been for the gitters.

It was sunset when Marsh turned off at Short Creek, crossed a road-wide grid of old railroad rails that served as a cattle guard, and was on the Ledington place. Another thing that Mr. Ledington believed in, Marsh remembered as the car hummed along a crushed-stone surface, was good roads for ranchers.

The ranch buildings were snugly situated in a widening of Short Creek Valley, the model-dairy barn showing up fine, but emphasizing the house's need for a coat of paint. When Marsh stopped in the ranch yard, Mrs. Ledington came from the milkhouse still carrying a cone of the cream separator she had been assembling for the evening's milk.

" Well, hello, Marsh." Mrs. Ledington was a large, competent woman whose smile erased the weariness from her features. " Haven't you got any of the rest of the family with you? "

" I just came to see Mr. Ledington," Marsh answered, the cold uneasiness a solid lump inside him.

" He hasn't come in from the wood lot yet."

At sight of the car, Louise had left her hayfork in the corral, where she had been feeding the horses. " You can drive up there. Just go on around the barn, and it's about half a mile up the hill." She spoke shyly, for, in common with all the girls in the eighth grade, she worshiped the captain of the high school football team.

Even the ranch trail to the wood lot was laid out on high ground along the fence, and readily passable. Marsh found Mr. Ledington swinging a heavy double-bitted ax, neat piles of brush marking the course of his work. He came to the car, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

" Mr. Ledington," Marsh said, " that dog of yours strayed over onto the Middlesworth place and pulled a coyote gitter. I brought the body back."

He could see anger tighten the man's lips.

" Mr. Middlesworth is sorry about it, and I am too," Marsh continued.." He told me to pay you what you considered the dog was worth."

Mr. Ledington said sharply, " The pup wasn't worth as much to me as the coyotes you've destroyed with those contraptions."

Marsh clamped his jaw shut. " Will you name a price for the dog, Mr. Ledington? "

The rancher made a quick gesture with his hand. " He wasn't worth much yet."

They were interrupted by a dog's demanding " Arf!

Arf! Arf! " from nearby.

" That's Fritz bringing in the milch cows," said Mr. Ledington. " I'll have to go open the pasture gate for him."

Marsh walked with the rancher to the adjoining pasture. Fritz expertly maneuvered the dairy herd through the gate and escorted them directly down the hill toward the barn.

" Fritz is getting old," Mr. Ledington continued, " and I was having him teach the pup how to drive. But the pup would stray, and he wasn't very reliable yet about heeling."

" Will you set a price for the time and trouble you put in training him? " Marsh asked.

" Ten dollars, if that will ease your conscience. But the fact remains, Cal Middlesworth is taking a lot on himself, Marsh, letting you put out these explosives, not knowing what they may kill."

Marsh wanted to say a lot of things: that the Fish and Wildlife Service protects desirable wildlife as well as domestic stock; that if what Gus Garver had said about the denning here was true, Mr. Ledington himself was forcing his neighbors into calling for help. But it would be no use. The man could outargue him, and was too prejudiced to reason with. Marsh gave Mr. Ledington a ten-dollar bill.

" I'll make out a receipt for you to sign," he said. " Mr. Middlesworth didn't ask for it, but I'd like to show Woody a paper accepting this amount as full settlement for the dog. He had Mr. Middlesworth sign a paper accepting responsibility for any accidents, even though the place is posted with warning notices."

" Sorry my dog never learned to read," Mr. Ledington said shortly.

They returned to the car to fix up the receipt, and Marsh unloaded the body of the dog.

" I'll bury him here before John Junior sees him," Mr. Ledington said. " Better if I just tell him about it."

Marsh drove away in silence, sorry for John Junior, for the accident, and for all the trouble it might set off. He wondered if Mr. Ledington would start campaigning now against the use of gitters, and against Woody and himself and the Middlesworths and anyone else who had anything to do with their use.

And then Marsh found his mind forming arguments in reply to anything that John Ledington might say. They were sound arguments too, and he could phrase them, mentally, in eloquent words. There rose in him a sudden, stubborn sense of loyalty to the whole program of livestock protection.

Then he grinned ruefully. I don't know why *I* need to get so steamed up, he mused. Likely the Fish and Wildlife Service can struggle along without Mr. Ledington's love and still manage to look out for its own future better than I'm looking out for mine.

3

YOU can take out the ad for John Ledington's dog," Marsh told the family at dinner.

" I'm sorry it happened," said Mrs. Temple. " But there never was an undertaking in which you couldn't expect to meet some setbacks."

Marsh appreciated the attempt at comfort.

" Now, I suppose," Marlou speculated, " Mr. Ledington will be really bitter about the hunting."

" John puts his whole heart into his beliefs," said her father.

Mom chuckled. " He's certainly not given to torturing himself with doubts and questions."

The conversation went on, but Marsh dropped out of it. Thinking of his own endless inner debate, he envied John Ledington. Things to believe in, a route to go. Life must be marvelously simple and direct when you achieved that, if you ever did.

Right now, though, Marsh was bone-tired, and nothing seemed really significant but Mom's baked chicken with cranberry sauce.

By the time the plates were cleared and Marlou had brought in the cup custards, he had definitely given up

thinking. Some of these days he'd have to decide what to do with his life, but that could wait. Meantime, he might as well enjoy the hunting he was doing for Mr. Middlesworth.

Next day he loaded all his extra traps and gitters in the car trunk — might as well make the most of this while it lasted. Mr. Middlesworth beckoned to him as he drove into the ranch yard. The rancher's face was solemn.

" Something seems to have gone wrong, Marsh," he said. " We had heavy losses last night. Worst this spring, in fact."

" Cryin' out loud! " exclaimed Marsh. " How d'you suppose — " He trailed off the sentence as a new idea came to him. " Say, I brought out all the spare gear I have. Thought I'd make a bunch of new sets. Maybe I timed it right."

" Might be the coyotes have started coming in from the north. You didn't have much equipment over there, did you? "

" No, and the Ledington place is a little north of here."

" How did John take it about his dog? "

Marsh handed the rancher the receipt and the fifteen dollars left from the twenty-five given him, and made his report. Mr. Middlesworth handed back the receipt.

" You keep that, at least until Woodford has seen it. But don't lose it. I'm sorry John feels the way he does, but if he was losing money like I did last night, he might see it differently. I'm glad you're putting out more stuff. I only hope the coyotes haven't got wise to it."

" I'll take Oatbin," said Marsh. " I can cover more ground riding, and I'll put out all this equipment."

He carried his saddle and bridle from the barn, stuck a couple of horse biscuits in his pocket, and drove the car

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through the pasture gate. He placed two fingers in his mouth and emitted a series of long, piercing whistles. He drove on slowly, then stopped to get out and whistle his signal again.

In a few minutes he heard a distant whinny, and spotted a pair of inquiring tan ears bobbing behind a nearby ridge. The big palomino came loping through the trees, and walked up to have his ears scratched. He nosed expectantly at the pockets of Marsh's jacket.

"O.K., O.K.," Marsh laughed, and brought out the biscuits.

With the speed of long practice, he put bridle and saddle on the horse, slung his sacks of gear on the cantle, and swung up. Oatbin took off for the north fence in a long lope, that deceptive gait between a canter and a gallop with which the Western-trained horse eats up the miles seemingly without effort. Several times Marsh slowed to ride quietly around small flocks of sheep milling dustily in sheltered clearings, the hazy air filled with the noises of anxious ewes and new lambs. These were "drop gathers" of animals that had fallen behind the regular bands and been left to rest until they could be herded in again.

Along the Middlesworth north fence Woody and Marsh had set only three gitters at one place and two at another, because the country was rough and the more natural approach for coyotes was through the open gulches to the west. Twice Marsh had not even checked the north line, for he had taken no prey there. But today, sharply aware of the defenseless animals behind him, he approached the fence carefully, studying the land for likely coyote trails. He led Oatbin through a gate and rode along the fence outside the pasture to the first station.

The first gitter he looked at was fired. He rode a quick circle to pick up his prey, but there was no prey. He got down, ground-hitching Oatbin with trailing reins, to search on foot. As he did so he passed another gitter. It also was fired. A quick look showed the third one also fired.

Briefly, then, Marsh hunted for dead coyotes. Certainty grew in him that he would find none. After five minutes he stopped, realizing he had something new to face.

The gitters had been fired by human hands. Coyotes had gone by, unmolested, to the bedded-down sheep. The herders, feeling safe behind the protection of gitters, had not taken their usual precautions. Result: the worst losses of the season.

Who had done it? Automatically, Marsh looked off to the east and north. At a guess, it was four or five miles, as a horse would travel, across there to Short Creek and Ledingtons'. Would Mr. Ledington —

Marsh didn't finish that thought. Somehow his mind rebelled. John Junior had had a boy's love for that dead dog. He knew the mountains for miles around his home as he knew the back of his hand; any ranch boy did. Here, to a kid, was poetic justice, ready to hand.

Marsh was sick as he turned to reloading and scenting the gitters. If the kid had hurt himself firing them — when Mr. Middlesworth found out . . . What a mess!

Marsh mounted and rode on to the next station, his spirits sinking as he found the first gitter fired. He didn't bother to look for a coyote, but reloaded and moved on.

The second gitter had not been touched. Marsh's jaw dropped open for a moment. Then he understood. This one was planted thirty yards away from the other, and located in tall grass. The kid had simply not found it.

Then a whole new line of questions hit Marsh, and he sat down abruptly to reconsider. One gitter hadn't been found. How had the rest been found? He recalled his father wondering how Marsh himself remembered where he'd put them. There was a lot of mountain here. Who could find an object no bigger than the end of a man's thumb stuck in the ground? Certainly not a boy who had slipped away from home and was working in hurried secrecy.

Marsh went back to a gitter that had been fired and searched the ground for tracks. There were none. The light was none too good by now, but clearly the ground was entirely smooth. Too smooth. He went to his knees and peered closely. Tiny parallel lines creased the dust. The guilty person had brushed out his tracks with a pine branch.

Rising, Marsh mounted quickly and rode on around the place without stopping. Whenever he passed sets, he rode aside only long enough to make sure that the gitters were fired. Most of them were, though a few had been missed. When he reached a place where he could get Oatbin back through the fence, he headed straight for the ranch house. Mr. Middlesworth saw him coming, and waited in the yard.

" Four out of five gitters along the north line were fired," Marsh said without preamble. " Same with six out of the eight I had time to check on the west."

" Fired! " Mr. Middlesworth looked blank.

" By somebody who brushed out his tracks with a pine branch."

" What the Sam Hill does that mean? "

" Somebody doesn't like you," Marsh declared grimly.

" John Ledington? Doesn't sound like John."

Marsh shook his head. " He couldn't have found 'em, anyway. Could you? "

" Come to think of it, I don't suppose I could," Mr. Middlesworth admitted. " Has to be somebody who knows where they are, eh? Whom does that leave? "

" Woody and me," Marsh said wryly, " you, and I suppose you've warned Pablo, your chief herder, what territory to keep the dogs clear of. Dad and Marlou have each been out with me once. That's the size of it."

" Not a very likely lot of suspects." The rancher pondered. " Well, Marsh, I don't see much to be done tonight, but go back to hanging out lanterns and keeping the men and dogs on watch. If I can borrow Oatbin, I'll give the orders. Tomorrow maybe we can figure out something."

" I'll get here just as soon as I can tomorrow," Marsh promised, and drove home in heavy thought.

He was eating dinner, preoccupied, when he became aware of Marlou snapping her fingers before his face.

" Alagazam! " intoned his twin.

" Gezunk," he replied absently. " What's wrong with you? "

" With you? " she echoed.

" Oh." He told the story of his afternoon. " And don't ask could it be Mr. Ledington. He's not that kind, and he couldn't find the gitters, anyway."

" That's good analysis of character, Marsh," approved Mr. Temple. After some thought, he added, " The only person who has objected to your work is Ivan Wagner."

" He couldn't find 'em either," said Marsh.

" I'd think," Marlou observed, " a great pathfinder like

yourself would simply track the culprit to his lair."

"Not if he brushed out his tracks," objected her mother.

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Marsh. "He wouldn't have brushed out his tracks very far. If I rode around a little, I bet I could pick up his trail back in the woods. You've got a brain, Brain."

Marlou wrinkled her nose at him.

"Suppose you do find his trail," Mrs. Temple asked. "Then what?"

"Let Cal take it from there," suggested Mr. Temple. "He should have grounds for bringing charges. If you get a line on the guilty party, let Cal know."

Marsh didn't sleep much that night, and school the next day might as well have been dismissed as far as he was concerned. It was only a few minutes after four when he arrived at the Middlesworth ranch, to find Mr. Middlesworth awaiting him.

"I had Felipe get in Oatbin and saddle up for you," said the rancher. "Reload all the gitters you can. That'll give us some protection, at least for tonight."

"I have two ideas," Marsh countered. "First, I'd like to spend an hour while the light is good trying to pick up the trail of whoever did this. Then I'd like to move the gitters before I reload. I could pick other likely locations, and maybe they'd not be found again."

Mr. Middlesworth nodded. "Let me know if you pick up a trail," he said, his face seamed.

Marsh rode away, heading for the south fence. At his first station, a cluster of four gitters, he found four fired. Dust ridged with the marks of the pine branch had been swept over all tracks. Marsh rode on for a hundred yards and started to circle.

Within five minutes he came upon the tracks of a shod horse that he believed had been ridden. The horse had been grazing, and then had moved on in a straight and apparently purposeful line. Marsh followed the line of tracks until the horse stopped again to graze. Not far away was another gitter station, and a quick inspection revealed that the gitters had been fired.

" This is the bird," Marsh said to himself as he remounted. " Hasn't missed a gitter so far. I'd give a cooky to know how he locates 'em."

He followed the tracks on to the southeast corner of the ranch. There they veered away to the south, and in another mile turned onto the state highway. Marsh stopped with an angry exclamation. In the welter of hoof and tire marks on the graveled surface, he might as well be looking for the needle in a haystack.

He went back to a bit of soft ground he remembered and tried to find in the clear tracks there some distinguishing mark about the prints. There was nothing, at least that he could see. The horse had no worn or broken shoe and his hoofs were neither especially large nor especially small.

At last he gave up and returned to his gitters. He gave his whole mind to remembering what Woody had told him about the habits of coyotes, and painstakingly removed each gitter to a new location that he hoped would be as good as the old. He worked his way along the south fence toward the west, hurrying as much as he could, wanting to get as many sets made before dark as possible.

It was murky dusk, with a thin purple haze in the clearings and a rim of after-sunset fire along the jagged tops of the Oroblancos, when Oatbin snorted. Marsh, on his knees pounding home a gitter tube, paid no attention at

first. Then the horse snuffed again, more loudly.

Marsh looked at him. The palomino's head was raised, and his sharp ears set forward questioningly. He was looking intently at the long grove of firs and pines that here reached up from the river almost to the Middlesworth fence.

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh said softly. " Somebody is out there watching me! "

Oatbin turned his head toward him, then swung his gaze back to the wooded stretch.

Marsh laid down his tools and gathered himself. In three jumps he hit the saddle and swept the reins up from the ground. He touched spurs to Oatbin and made a dash for the woods.

When they reached the trees, Marsh had all he could do to stay in the saddle. Oatbin leaped over fallen logs, swerved back and forth, and swept under trees. No horse

ever gets the idea that his rider can't clear any overhead obstruction he himself can go under, so Marsh was flattened along the palomino's neck most of the time.

After a little of this he pulled Oatbin to a stop. He peered around, but it was already full dark in the woods, and even had it been light the evergreen needles would have held little sign. Then above the horse's breathing he heard a sharp sound — click-te-click — then silence again, but it was enough. Hoofs of a galloping horse had struck a rocky spot.

Marsh reined around and rode on. If only he dared ride full speed! Yet he might be going in the wrong direction. Sound was deceiving in these surroundings.

He broke into the open above the river. A flash of movement caught his eye — just half a glimpse, far off across the river — the rear of a horse, and a rider's back, a patch of tan and dirty white. A startled exclamation burst from him.

" Cryin' out loud! Gus Garver! "

He lifted the reins and set himself for the steep descent. But in a moment he slowed Oatbin, turned him aside along the slope, and, his mind bleak, headed back for the ranch.

An hour later, in the midst of a council of war at the ranch house, his excitement was gone.

" Could you be sure it was Gus? " Mr. Middlesworth asked.

Marsh shook his head. " There'd be no finding Gus, if it was near dark. I could name twenty men that wear a tan jacket, and three or four that ride pinto horses. The horse might even have been a light gray, and the Basin is full of those."

" But only one," said Mr. Middlesworth, " that would

want to spy on you. I'd like to have a look at that paint horse of Gus's right now."

Marsh shook his head. " There'd be no finding Gus, if that's for sure who it was. That's why I gave up chasing him. He sleeps out half the time, anyway, in this kind of weather, which gives him the whole Basin as a hide-out. He'd shoot a rabbit for his supper, or mooch a meal off the cook at any one of a dozen ranches."

" That's right." Mr. Middlesworth nodded. " He puts in most of his time on the prowl. He could have been spying on you all along, Marsh. It adds up."

" Besides," Marsh said, " he was sore because I got to help the Government hunter instead of him. Don't know why I didn't think of Gus before."

After a while Mr. Middlesworth said gloomily: " This still leaves the sheep unprotected. For tonight I guess we'll have to keep up the guard. I'll notify the men."

Marsh drove on back to town and a late dinner which his mother had kept warm in the oven.

" I'm sorry it appears to be Gus," Mr. Temple said, after Marsh had told his story. " Any other fellow, you could speak to his dad and get the thing straightened out. But Red Garver was never too good at taking care of himself, and now that he's stove up with rheumatism, the boy just runs wild."

" Gus has always been right at the fringe of the law," Marlou commented. " Seemed to turn naturally in that direction."

" No," said her mother. " Gus has always been on the defensive, and adrift. We don't believe in natural badness."

" Actually, Gus has never had any direction." Mr. Temple took it up. " He's had no help in knowing what

to do with himself. When you think of it, Gus knows a lot of woodcraft, and he has great strength and endurance. Those things ought to be put to use. But while he has been reaching a man's age and size, nobody has troubled to help him find a man's place in life."

Marsh said: "That's not a question a person would want to answer for anybody else. It's tough enough for yourself."

The talk toned down his feelings toward Gus. He'd been mad enough to start carrying a gun on his rounds. Maybe he had more in common with Gus than he'd suspected.

Yet the next afternoon, when he took a quick ride along the line of gitters he had so painstakingly reset the evening before and found every one fired, he turned back to the ranch house, baffled and furious.

"I think I'd better get hold of Woodford," Mr. Middlesworth decided. "He's likely had some experience with this kind of stuff. I don't see any use in you resetting the gitters, Marsh, as things stand now."

There was no reproach in the words, but to Marsh they added up to a dismissal. He unsaddled Oatbin and turned him into the pasture, and glumly headed the car back toward Chiricahua. His hunting days, he realized bitterly, were over.

He might as well face it, he told himself. The one thing he wanted to do he couldn't do satisfactorily. The first four days, using Woody's sets, he'd taken some animals. The last three days he hadn't got a thing, even with the traps and gitters Gus had overlooked. It was odd, in a way, that some of those unmolested sets hadn't picked up at least one or two animals. The way it had started off — Suddenly he sat bolt upright at the wheel.

That first fired gitter and sprung trap! Before all the trouble started! Cryin' out loud, those animals had been stolen! All this recent dirty work made that doubly sure now. Gus had begun by stealing the prey, and only later had thought of also firing the gitters. He no doubt still picked up any dead animals he found.

There might be the way to get at this, if only the stolen fur could be located. Gus had probably sold it to Ivan Wagner, or had tried to.

Marsh drove home rapidly. No one was at the house; the family were probably still at the *Tribune* office. From the garage, he got the skin of the coyote he had shot the day Woody came, and strode off toward the Wagner Wool and Hide Company.

Ivan Wagner was on the loading platform as Marsh climbed the steps.

" You going to start trapping Guido Rapelli's place? " the fur dealer asked, without greeting.

Marsh stared. " Where'd you hear that? "

" It's being talked. Of course if Guido lost one of his goats, he'd want every coyote killed off for forty miles around."

Marsh didn't know what to say. He asked, " Could I sell you this pelt of a coyote I shot last week? "

Ivan Wagner said heavily: " I've got the basement stacked with furs that wouldn't bring enough to pay the freight to Denver. I guess another seventy-five cents won't break me. Throw it against the wall there."

This wasn't finding out whether Gus had sold Mr. Wagner a stolen pelt. Marsh said, " I'm surprised the Government hunting makes any difference to you, since furs are worth so little."

" They shouldn't be worth so little," Ivan Wagner said

hotly. " Furs were worth plenty till the Government took over. My whole family, for generations, made good money in fur, clear back to my great-grandfather, in Leipzig. Now I buy stinking hides and sheep's wool."

As once before, Marsh was stopped by the violence of the speech. Finally he said: " I don't want you to buy this skin as a favor. What will you do with it? "

" Burn it, probably, someday, with all the rest," returned the heavy, bitter voice. " It's a good pelt too. A real fur craftsman could make it into a collar that would delight the heart of your sister, or your girl friend. But there aren't many craftsmen left."

" Would that cost much? " asked Marsh, genuinely interested.

" For the work, no. Add the Federal luxury tax, and you probably can't afford it. I'll get your money from the cash register." Mr. Wagner turned into his office.

Marsh drew a deep breath and slid into the warehouse. Careful Ivan Wagner would stop to make a note of the transaction. Marsh might get a minute to look around.

A quick glance showed him a little pile of furs in one corner. He fumbled rapidly through them and suddenly, his heart pounding, yanked one coyote pelt from the pile. Hard anger seized him, and he whirled, the pelt in hand, toward the door.

" What are you doing in here? " Wagner demanded harshly, confronting him as he turned.

" Looking for this! " Marsh held up the pelt. " This coyote was taken with a Government cyanide gun on the Middlesworth ranch no longer ago than last Saturday. Who brought it in? "

" Are you kidding? " But Wagner's tone had lost, Marsh thought, a shade of belligerence. " A coyote's a

coyote. There's nothing distinctive about that pelt."

" The muzzle is splashed with the indelible yellow dye that is loaded into every Government cyanide cartridge. That's how I knew what had happened to John Ledington's dog. Did Gus Garver sell you this pelt, Mr. Wagner? "

Marsh observed that Mr. Wagner was watching him rather than examining the pelt. " You sure that's the Government brand, Marsh? "

Marsh looked up in surprise at the conciliatory tone, but there was nothing conciliatory in the man's narrowed eyes. Marsh said: " I can show you four like it up at Middlesworths'. But what I want to know, was it Gus that brought it in? "

" That would make it easy, wouldn't it? " the man suddenly sneered. " Nobody'd miss Gus if he was sent to Buena Vista, and it'd scare any competition away from the Government. I wouldn't tell you who sold me that pelt if I knew, which I don't."

Marsh gave it up. " I guess all I can do is report one pelt stolen and sold by person or persons unknown, as they say. I have to report to this hunter from Hardscrabble on all pelts taken with his equipment."

He was totally unprepared for Wagner's reaction.

The fur dealer groaned. " I'll have a bunch of Federal bureaucrats hounding me for the next ten years. Take it, Marsh, and forget about it."

" But you — I mean — you paid for the fur, to somebody."

" Maybe seventy-five cents." Wagner waved a hand. " If it was seventy-five dollars, I wouldn't answer all the questionnaires and dig through all the records on one skin. Forget it, will you? "

" I — " Marsh floundered. " But somebody's getting away — "

" With six bits' worth of mangy fur," cut in Wagner. " Suppose we *could* figure out who it was. Is it worth sending him up for a lousy coyote pelt? The Government hasn't lost anything, so what does it cost to give somebody a break? I say, keep mum about it."

" Well — " Marsh said, still doubtful.

" O.K., it's agreed," Ivan Wagner said quickly. " And here's the seventy-five cents for the pelt you brought in."

His mind a little fogged by all these explosive new pieces in his puzzle, Marsh carried out the stolen pelt.

" Don't tell me," said a voice as he rounded Coronado and Vine, " you found that sitting on the courthouse steps."

Marsh shifted the pelt to the other arm. " Hi! " he said. " Am I glad to see you! "

" I'll bet that's what you tell all your sisters."

" No kid," Marsh said seriously. He sketched the events of the afternoon as they walked along. " How about the loan of a brain? "

Marlou pondered for some time. " I don't catch Mr. Wagner's angle," she confessed. " As far as I know, he's always been considered strictly responsible, as per his standing ad in the *Tribune*. He sends Dad a check for twenty-five dollars the first of every month without even being billed."

Marsh hadn't thought of that. " Hope he doesn't get sore at Dad."

" He won't do anything," Marlou predicted.

" No? How come? "

" He knew that pelt was stolen when he bought it."

" Now wait a minute! "

" He told you his family'd been in the fur business for generations. You think he doesn't know all angles like that dye in the cyanide gun? "

Marsh drew a breath. " So that's why he insisted I must keep quiet. Cryin' out loud, I always took it for granted he was honest." They took a few slow steps in silence. " I still haven't caught up with Gus," Marsh said then.

" You'd better keep away from Gus," advised the girl. " You haven't got a thing in the world on him."

" But it couldn't be anybody else firing those gitters."

" So what? The world is full of things you know but can't prove."

" Then what do you suggest? " Marsh demanded.

" That we go home to dinner before Mom phones the town marshal," his twin replied promptly. " I happen to know there's filet of sole, and fish is good brain food."

" Race you," said Marsh, and they were off down the street.

The next morning at breakfast Marlou said, " If Marsh would help me at the office for a while, Dad, could we take the car and drive down to Rapellis'? "

Marsh raised a surprised eyebrow at his sister.

" You're going to trap the Rapelli place, aren't you? Anyway, you're washed up at Middlesworths' so long as somebody keeps firing your gitters. Rapellis' scatters your activities and makes it harder to keep track of you, and at Fort Royal I could pick up an item or two for the society page."

" That makes it practically newspaper business," Mr. Temple said wryly. " I'm framed."

For an hour the twins were busy in the office, Marlou rapping out news on a typewriter and Marsh, with ruler and lettering pen, struggling over layouts for the ads.

" And so to press," the girl said finally. They gathered up the sheets and carried them into the composing room. Mr. Temple stopped the clank and thud of the linotype.

" Put them on the stone," he said. " You've earned the car. Have a nice trip."

For eighteen miles the highway wound along the valley of the Chiricahua River toward the eastern rim of the Basin at Gopher Gorge. On the right the twins passed rich farms irrigated from the river. To the left rose the bald buttes and piñon bluffs of typical southwestern semidesert serrated by dry washes. Far off to the west towered the glistening cone of Holystone Peak.

It didn't take Marlou long to pick up three social items from the Fort Royal postmistress.

" That sort of justifies the trip," Marsh said as they got in the car again and turned off the highway to cross the river. " I don't know as I've got much to say to Mr. Rapelli."

Marlou considered. " Then let it go as a call by me on Rosa. I've always liked her, though she's never invited me to her home. But she's getting married this summer, and I'd like her to know we feel friendly."

" I'll buy that," agreed Marsh promptly. " They don't come any finer than Savvy. They make a swell couple."

Four and a half miles from Fort Royal up the winding canyon of Lame Horse Creek, they came to the Rapelli home, a steep-roofed log house that looked like a picture out of the Swiss Alps. Rosa, clad in sweater and jeans, was busy among the flowers when they drove up. She generally rated the prettiest girl at County High, with her clear olive skin, fine brown eyes, and graceful carriage.

" Why, hello, twins," she smiled shyly. " Will you come in? "

Before Marlou could reply, Guido Rapelli emerged from the barn. " 'Allo, my friends," he shouted happily. " 'Allo. You're-a welcome. Come in. Come into the house. Mamma, guests we have! "

At the sound of his voice, Rapellis of all ages and sizes swarmed into the yard and swept Marsh and Marlou into the house in a gust of excitement. Mrs. Rapelli, a motherly version of Rosa twenty years older, unnecessarily dusted already shining chairs for the visitors.

" Almost-a time for lonch, Mamma," cried Mr. Rapelli, who seemed never to speak without vigorous enthusiasm.

" We really can't stay," said Marlou. " Dad will need the car."

" Then a glass of milk," Mr. Rapelli insisted. Almost at once they had tall glasses of cold milk and crusty round slices of delicious bread, well buttered. Marsh was surprised to find the milk excellent, with no hint of goat flavor.

" Marsh, how she's-a going, this coyote-hunting? " asked Mr. Rapelli.

Marsh said, uncertainly, " Well, I don't know."

" I had Rosa write me the letter to these Fish and Wildlife," Mr. Rapelli declared. " By golly, I wish I had-a you to help me out, like-a Cal Middlesworth."

With a sudden warm feeling inside, Marsh said: " I sure wish I could. Did I understand you to say you lose only billies? "

" That's-a right. Always at night we put up the flock in corrals, but in the evening before they come in we lose-a the billy many times. Never the nanny, and only once in a while the kid. Only yesterday — I show-a you."

He led Marsh out over the precipitous pastures, and presently came upon the sprawled body of a finely horned billy goat.

" Why," said Marsh, " he doesn't seem damaged a bit." He examined the ground carefully, but could find no tracks that he could distinguish. " There's only this place on the back of his neck."

Mr. Rapelli nodded. " His neck, she's-a broke."

" This is beyond me," Marsh admitted. " Mr. Middlesworth has sent for that hunter from Hardscrabble to come back again. Would you like for me to ask him about this? And if he'll let me have some more gitters, would you want me to come up and set them? "

Mr. Rapelli exclaimed. " I be glad to pay you."

" I don't know if I could do any good," said Marsh. " I've run into trouble at the Middlesworth place."

" You mean this-a dog John Ledington's-a tell everybody about? "

" There's more than that," said Marsh, and reluctantly told about the fired gitters.

" There's a guy-a should be shot! " cried Mr. Rapelli. " By golly, you come down here, I send-a my boys out with you to see nobody-a spies."

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh was excited. " Why didn't I think of that? Mr. Rapelli, I'll be down here with some gitters if I have to steal 'em out of that hunter's truck."

Marsh started back to the house at once. Marlou and Rosa were engrossed in the contents of a large and ornate cedar chest, but when Marlou saw Marsh's face she rose to leave.

" I'm coming back," Marsh told her as the Rapellis escorted them to the car. " Mr. Rapelli has given me a swell

idea for getting rid of the interference, and he's going to let me trap his place."

"My friend," Mr. Rapelli declared fervently, "this place she's-a yours. You blow him in-a little pieces if you want."

4

WHEN Marsh drove back into Chiricahua, the Middlesworth pickup was parked at the Mercantile, where the ranch cook was engaged in his weekly buying of supplies. Marlou took the car home and Marsh rode on up to the ranch in the pickup. He was anxious to propose Mr. Rapelli's solution to the problem of the fired gitters. He found the rancher talking to Woody and another man.

Woody said: " Hi, Marsh. Mr. Killion, this is Marsh Temple. This is my boss, the field supervisor for the Service in this district, Mr. J. D. Killion."

Marsh shook hands with a big, pleasant-faced man in a khaki field uniform. " I suppose you've come to see about the fired gitters. I just picked up an idea about those."

" Mainly," Mr. Killion smiled, " we came to see you, Marsh. The Service has received a complaint from a Mr. Rapelli, a goat rancher, and Mr. Ringland, the forest ranger, reports a mountain lion killing deer. It looks as if the Chiricahua needs a regular hunter stationed right here."

" That's probably so," Marsh nodded, but his middle was hollow. He had a feeling he was being eased out.

" I don't have a regular man available at this time," the supervisor said. " Would you like to go on our payroll as an apprentice trapper, with the Basin as your territory? "

For a minute Marsh couldn't get his breath. Then he managed to say a faint, " Cryin' out loud! "

" You'll soon be out of school, I understand, and can go on full time. Woody would oversee your work, and I'd come in as often as I could. We can pay you $150 a month, plus five cents a mile for your truck and fifteen dollars a month for your horse."

Marsh stammered: " I don't know. I never figured — " He didn't know exactly what it was he hadn't figured.

Mr. Killion said: " This isn't permanent. You may not be cut out for a trapper, or you may decide you want to do something else. You'll find out while you're tackling the job's problems."

Marsh tried to sort out his thoughts. He wanted the job terribly, but what would his folks think? He'd be working this summer anyway, and Bill Goodhue's dad couldn't pay . . . At $150 he could help Marlou with her college expenses, if he stayed on. Was this going to be the answer to his problem?

" I ought to talk it over with my folks," he said.

" We've talked with your dad," said Mr. Killion. " I'd be safe in telling you it's to be your decision alone."

Marsh took a deep breath. " Then I'll do it," he said, and was amazed to find his mind more at ease than it had been for weeks. He rapidly filled out the necessary forms. Even though this wasn't permanent . . .

" You think these jobs will take a long time? " he asked hopefully.

Woody said: " As soon as it's known you're available,

you'll hear about more stock-killin' varmints than you ever imagined existed. And you won't get rid of these varmints overnight."

" You said you had an idea, Marsh," put in Mr. Middlesworth, who had heretofore been silent.

" Nobody could just slip around and locate those gitters to fire them," Marsh said positively. " It's being done by somebody who spies on me when I make my sets."

Woody looked thoughtful. " That's possible, though a man who knew enough about wildlife could make a pretty shrewd guess."

" Mr. Rapelli is going to send a couple of his sons with me if I plant gitters there, and they'll range out into the woods to make sure nobody spies on me."

Mr. Killion nodded. " We could try that right here. Woody and I will go out with you now."

Mr. Middlesworth had a man saddle horses for the Government men while Marsh caught up Oatbin. The three cut south across the woods pasture.

" If this tampering continues," Mr. Killion said, as they rode along, " Marsh'll have to see that the criminal is arrested."

" Me? " exclaimed Marsh, startled. " Cryin' out loud! "

" Get your evidence complete, and then call on the local law officers for whatever help you need."

Marsh said, " I didn't know I had any authority."

" Plenty," Woody told him. " This is tamperin' with Government property. Whoever's doing it knows what he's doin', or he'd steal the gitters instead of firin' 'em. Havin' U.S. property in his possession, he'd be a lot easier to send up."

" But how would I nail him? " queried Marsh.

" Play sleuth," Mr. Killion answered. " We hope you

won't have to. Hunting criminals is not our line. We're interested in predator control, but man is the most destructive predator of them all."

As they worked through the early afternoon resetting the gitters, Marsh pondered. This might sound exciting if you saw it in the movies, with a G man chasing some sinister character. But Gus Garver — why, he'd sat across the aisle from Gus in seventh grade!

" Dad runs a letters-to-the-editor column in the paper," he said finally. " Maybe if you'd write a letter explaining how this is a crime, and likely to land somebody in the Federal penitentiary, the tampering would stop."

" It might help," agreed Mr. Killion. " I'll do that when we go in."

They made fast work of the resetting, and by four thirty were in the truck headed for town.

" You've been to Rapellis'? " Woody asked Marsh.

" Yes, and I couldn't figure the thing out." Marsh told of the billy goat with the broken neck.

" It happens I know the answer to that one," the hunter said. " That bite on the back of the neck is cat work, not coyote."

" Bobcat? " Marsh was amazed. " But a billy goat is five or six times his size."

" And besides," said Mr. Killion, " the cat is not interested in goats, and is often a very useful citizen. What happens is this: The cat comes strolling along looking for mice and other rodents. He meets a flock of goats, but keeps on about his business. Billy, though, figurin' he's lord-protector of his family, sends them on their way while he stops to challenge Bob to a fight."

" Cryin' out loud! And the cat wins? "

" Every time. Billy puts his head down and makes a

charge. Bob splits the exact second, jumps in the air, and comes down on Billy's shoulders. Bites into his vertebrae, and that's that. Set some Number 3 traps and you'll stop Mr. Rapelli's goat losses."

" Wait till you've been on the job awhile," said Woody. " You'll come up with some questions none of us can answer. Be sure you put those traps where domestic animals won't be likely to get into them."

Marsh produced the receipt signed by John Ledington and told about the dog.

" That was bad luck," Mr. Killion said. " Legally, Mr. Middlesworth wasn't obligated to pay for the dog, but it's Service policy to do everything possible to get the cooperation and good will of the ranchers. I'm glad you handled it as you did."

Mr. Killion got out at the newspaper office in Chiricahua to write his letter of warning about tampering with Government property, and Marsh went with Woody to the Temple home to check over supplies. Presently Mr. Killion joined them.

" I'll be over the Monday after you graduate," Woody told Marsh, " and go around with you to get started."

" I hope so," Marsh said fervently. " I sure feel as if I didn't know where to begin — coyotes, lions, bobcats."

" It's a man-sized job," Mr. Killion agreed; " a battle to the death against claw and fang, and twenty-five hundred square miles of battlefield." The truck rolled away.

Marsh's throat was full. A man-sized job, and all his! His blood was singing, and he gloried in the challenge of his wild adversaries and of the bold miles that would be the arena for the struggle.

Then, at last, he settled his shoulders and went in to dinner.

" I understand," his father said across the table, " the Basin is to have a full-time Government hunter."

Marsh was guarded. " I hope you're not disappointed."

There was a brief pause before Mom replied, " Are you? "

Marsh was provoked that he didn't get a direct answer. " I think it a sensible thing. You folks won't have the drain of college expense for me, with doubtful benefits. You can concentrate on Marlou, who's cut out for school anyway. And with regular salary, I can chip in the price of a new pair of nylons once in a while if — "

" Now hold on, nature's nobleman," interrupted Marlou. " Since when did I become the mortgage in your life? I don't want you switching from college to coyotes on my account."

" But cryin' out loud! " Marsh burst out. " I know I can trap coyotes, and I don't think I can make the grade in college."

Mr. Temple said: " Then at least taking this job has accomplished one thing. It's relieved the pressure of trying to decide what you'll do with your immediate future. Is that it? "

" Well — " said Marsh. " Anyway, I do like the work, and, as Mr. Killion says, there's nothing permanent about the arrangement. Right now it's pretty important too. You take people like Mr. Middlesworth and Mr. Rapelli: if I can stop their losses, I'll be worth every cent of my pay."

" More than worth it," agreed his father. " And now that you have the job, I hope you'll secure the training to do it well."

Which still didn't mean definitely, Marsh thought, that his father approved or disapproved.

Mr. Killion's letter appeared, and at once Marsh discovered that it had been widely read. A dozen people stopped him on the street. One of these was Mr. Ringland, tall and erect in his forest-green uniform.

" Soon as you have time," said the ranger, " I want to talk to you about a mountain lion."

" I'll be over," Marsh promised. The new job hadn't hurt him anyway with Diane's father.

Ed Linck, who owned the garage, stopped at the house to say he had a war surplus jeep, taken in on a new tractor, which might answer Marsh's need for a truck. The price was $175 and it needed $125 worth of new parts.

" It'll take me two months to earn three hundred dollars," Marsh objected. " And that doesn't cover installing the parts."

" I'll go on your note at the bank," Mr. Temple offered.

" Nearly everybody has to have a loan to get started," Mom smiled at him.

" Monthly payments," Marlou added. " You're old enough to know, Marsh."

Marsh hesitated.

" About the mechanical work," Ed Linck said; " you come over during slack hours and I'll lend you the tools and show you what to do to fix it up yourself."

Marsh felt suddenly better. Not only was his transportation problem settled, but his father had apparently endorsed and approved his work.

When he again checked his gitters at Middlesworths', Felipe accompanied him, riding wide as a guard. They took three coyotes, and Marsh felt he'd found a solution to the tampering problem. True, it took an extra man's time, but that might not be necessary for long. Gus was

not known for his stick-to-it-iveness.

Everybody seemed to have something to say about Marsh's job. A few days later, passing the Chiricahua Merc, Marsh stopped suddenly.

" Hi, Savvy," he cried. " Howya, boy? "

" Hello, Marsh." Severiano Diaz had his arms full of packages from the general store, but he managed to stick out a hand. He was a tall, strikingly handsome youth of cat-lithe grace and sculptured dark features. He flashed startlingly white teeth in a smile. " Been a long time."

" Long time," Marsh agreed. " How's the old passing arm? Hey, that's a pretty sharp outfit you're wearing, fella. Thought you weren't getting married till July."

" A *vaquero* doesn't hit town very often," laughed Savvy, shifting his bundles to display the silver conchas on his ornate leather vest. " I got this rig to ride in at the Goldpan rodeo on the Fourth, not for a wedding suit. Say, I hear you got a job for yourself."

" Seems as though. You still do some hunting, Savvy? "

" Oh, a little. We have all those dogs on the place, so I fool around with training 'em to tree bobcats. Or I did before I got so busy building a new house for Rosa. You ought to come out and see our place, Marsh."

" I will," Marsh promised. " You're a lucky stiff, Savvy. We've got to know Rosa better since I've been trapping down there, and we think a lot of her."

Savvy grinned. " We see eye to eye on that. About your job, though, it's a good thing *mi abuelo* has passed on."

Marsh said, puzzled, " What's your grandfather got to do with it? "

" Grandpa would turn over in his grave," Savvy chuckled. " Among my people, the old ones used to say Don Coyote has an evil eye, you know."

" I *didn't* know," said Marsh. Usually you didn't think about Savvy's nationality. The kids had shortened his sonorous first name to the English version of the Spanish word for " know," and he'd been one of the gang when he graduated from County High a year ago. A fast, smart wing back, and a right guy.

" I remember how grandpa used to tell me, when I was small, ' *Cuidado al coyote,*' " Savvy mused, the musical flavor of Spanish strong in his voice. " Watch out for the coyote." He added, " A coyote *is* a plenty smart animal."

" You can say that again," agreed Marsh.

" Don Coyote was almost a person — no, more than a person — to the old ones," Savvy said. " Sometime I'll tell you some of the stories I was brought up on. Much more exciting than Mother Goose."

" That's a promise," declared Marsh. He walked on thinking he was glad modern Mexicans felt different. Cryin' out loud, there was a considerable Mexican population in the Basin. If they'd objected to his work, it would have been tough. He had enough opposition as it was.

More than enough, in fact. One evening after dinner his father handed him a letter. Marsh read it, first in wonder, and then in anger.

> Sir:
>
> You may not publish this letter, in which case the people of the Chiricahua Basin will understand. The thinking citizens of this county are opposed to the predatory animal hunting program of the Fish and Wildlife Service because they are opposed to indiscriminate slaughter under any auspices. Yet we were informed last week through your columns that we must not

oppose the program, under pain of Federal prosecution, fine, and imprisonment. I have been told this is a free country. I was also told, in your presence, that no Government hunter was contemplated for the Chiricahua Basin. Was I misinformed on both counts?

The *Tribune* was largely responsible for bringing this restrictive Government agency to the Basin. This is understandable now that the editor's son has secured a well-paid job. However, now that you must know the destructive nature of their activities, the editorial policy of the *Tribune* should be directed toward getting these people out of here if your paper has the best interests of the community at heart.

John Ledington, Short Creek Ranch.

" You're not going to print this tripe? " Marsh demanded.

" Yes," said Mr. Temple.

" But it's not true. Nobody's threatened with fine and imprisonment unless he tampers with Government property. What about Mr. Middlesworth and Mr. Rapelli? Aren't they thinking citizens? And as for indiscriminate slaughter — Just because he couldn't keep his dog at home — "

" Remember your blood pressure," Marlou chided. " Why don't you go froth at the typewriter and cook up a scathing reply? "

" By golly, I will! And I want it printed right under Mr. Ledington's letter."

" No," said Mr. Temple. " Yours, Marsh, will appear next week. If I printed it in the same issue, I'd be using the paper to promote my own family's interests."

" Why do you have to print his lies? " Marsh stormed.

" A real newspaper prints both sides, even if one side is twisted. I'll append an editor's note: ' Reader Ledington is misinformed on at least one count. The Fish and Wildlife Service was brought here at the request of two prominent ranchers and the forest ranger.' "

Marsh asked, " Does that mean you don't want to be blamed? "

" It means I believe the best cure for misstatement is fact. I'm thinking as a newspaperman; you're thinking as a hunter."

" I'd like to know how I stand around here," Marsh smoldered after a moment.

" I think you're wonderful! " murmured Marlou, and immediately fled, shouting: " Mom! Stop him! " all the way to her room.

Marsh, angry for the moment, was glad Marlou had broken up the discussion and given him time to cool off. Dad was right — of course. Only he couldn't help wishing they'd tell him they thought he was doing the right thing.

He never did write an answer to Mr. Ledington's letter. Between getting his jeep put in shape and buying himself a rifle, and seeing after sets at Mr. Middlesworth's and watching the traps at Rapellis', there wasn't time. He continued to take some coyotes, but he had no luck with the traps. They were always either sprung and empty or just plain empty.

He also had the business of finishing high school. The first thing he knew it was Friday, the twenty-fifth of May, and graduation would be that night. He arrived home at two o'clock and he had nothing below a C. So that was that.

By eight o'clock that night, the high school auditorium was jammed with people from Goldpan and Fort Royal and Chiricahua — ranchers from the Lame Horse region and from the headwaters of Piñon Creek and all points between. As all the young people in the county attended high school at Chiricahua, this was one of the significant events of the year.

Lining up for the processional in the hall outside Room 204, Marsh surveyed his white-gowned sister.

" You're a toothsome morsel," he announced, " but I don't see how you keep so cool. If I had a speech to make, I'd drop dead."

" The undisturbed complexion comes from the drug-store," Marlou confessed. " Underneath, I'm white as my dress."

The speaker system gave forth the strains of " Coronation " and the graduates moved forward. Kids Marsh and

Marlou had grown up with — among them Rosa Rapelli, Diane Ringland, and Bill Goodhue — paced toward the platform in a double column down the long aisle between rows of rapt parents.

A lump the size of a baseball rose in Marsh's throat, and he kept his jaw set against it, his eyes glued to the small of Bill Goodhue's back. The minister gave the invocation and Marsh sank into his chair, thankful it was toward the back of the platform.

The judge from Baca gave the commencement address. " Meet your work, and citizenship, and life, honestly and sincerely. Whatever you do, give it your best."

That's it, Marsh thought. I'm going to be the best trapper I can.

After the address Rosa Rapelli sang, with the music teacher accompanying her at the piano. Rosa had a beautiful, full soprano voice, and even though encores hadn't been anticipated, the applause was so prolonged and determined that she had to repeat the refrain. In the fourth row, left, Marsh could see Guido Rapelli mopping his cheeks with a big white handkerchief, and Savvy Diaz clapping furiously.

Marlou stepped forward and gave the valedictory, her voice clear and controlled. Marsh hung on every word. After that the awards were presented. Then Mr. Schuyler, the principal, was standing.

" As you know, County High under certain conditions may award one of its graduates a college scholarship. This year the Colorado Scholarship, providing tuition and fees for the four-year course at any of the six state colleges or universities the student may choose, has been won by the class valedictorian, Marcia Louise Temple."

Marsh managed to keep from leaping to his feet, but

he clapped until his hands were afire. Marlou was radiant as she stepped forward to take the certificate, but to the knowing eye of her twin her smile was a trifle unsteady. He wasn't seeing too well himself.

The County High school board took over. The members of the class went up for their diplomas as Mr. Ledington, president of the board, read their names. They looked solemn-faced and correct. A brief smile, a handclasp, a little roll of parchment carried carefully back to the chair. An end, and a beginning . . . Marcia Louise Temple and Marshall Louis Temple. Marsh didn't stumble or drop the parchment. Mr. Ledington shook his hand and said, " Good luck, Marsh."

Marsh almost failed to say, " Thank you."

Suddenly it was all over. The strains of " Coronation " rolled out through the auditorium. Then they were in the hall, milling about, the girls clasping each other and wiping their eyes, the boys slapping one another's shoulders and laughing in their deepest voices.

The audience came pouring out and engulfed them, shaking hands and offering congratulations. The community took them up, and they were no longer The Class. They were people of the Basin, with work to do and lives to live.

Marsh worked his way into the knot surrounding Marlou and excitedly discussing her scholarship. As soon as he was within reach she seized his arm, a long-standing signal meaning, " Let's go."

He piloted her proudly through the crowd, knowing what a picture she made in her white gown with her radiant, dimpled smile. They passed the Goodhue family.

" See you folks at the house," Marlou said.

" I'd forgotten all about us tossing a party! " Marsh ex-

claimed. They joined their parents and all four made their way outside.

Marsh said, " Golly, I'm proud of you, Marlou."

" Isn't it wonderful? " Marlou said happily. " I — I think I'm going to cry."

" Hey, nix," Marsh begged.

Mr. Temple began to laugh.

Five minutes after they reached the house, the Goodhues arrived.

" Could I take off my tie? " Bill pleaded.

" Two hours of being a gentleman is more than Bill can take," was the younger-sister comment of Barbara Goodhue.

Marsh and Bill shed suit coats and white ties. The girls put up their wraps and fussed with their make-up. Other families came one after the other. Shortly the Temple home, as someone said, was divided into three parts, like all Gaul. Fathers occupied the living room and mothers chatted in the kitchen and dining room as they helped with the refreshments. The high school crowd took over the big den room downstairs.

Marsh's graduation gift to his sister was a set of dance records. She put one on the player, and they coupled off to try out new steps. Not a bad investment, Marsh reflected, experimenting on a fox trot with blond Diane Ringland. Then Diane found the twins' square dance album in the cabinet.

" Oh, come on, everybody," she called. " Here, Marsh; first couple." They did a hilarious " She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain." They grapevine-twisted, dipped-and-dived, and do-si-doed through to the waltz quadrille of " Cowboy's Dream."

Bill shouted then, " Take your lady to her chair; you

know where and I don't care."

Mrs. Temple called down the stairs, " Food! "

" I'm headin' for that golden stair! " whooped Bill.

They consumed stacks of sandwiches and did their best to empty the apparently bottomless punch bowl. Bill, always the tease, devoted several solemn minutes to an attempt at picking grapes from Mrs. Temple's fruit bowl picture.

" Now," Mrs. Temple said, in the midst of the general hilarity, " I know I'm a success."

After the guests had departed, the Temples fell to restoring the house to order.

" So we've graduated," Marlou said dreamily.

" Don't pinch me," Marsh begged. " If I'm only dreaming I made it, I don't want to wake up."

Mr. Temple chuckled. " You'll wake up with the plunge into the cruel, cold world on Monday."

Marsh paused with his hands full of punch glasses. " You got a point, Pop. Tonight Mr. Ledington shook hands and wished me luck. I wonder what he'll say when I start full-time war on the coyotes and bobcats — and Mr. Ringland's mountain lion? "

Marlou said, " Perhaps he's heard about Mr. Wagner, and Gus, and it's brought out his sporting instinct to root for the underdog."

Marsh's face turned gloomy. " Could be. Or maybe he's talked with Mr. Rapelli and figures I'm no menace to wildlife anyhow — I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't hit a dead-end trail when I signed up for this job."

" If we're taking down our back hair," his twin said gravely, " I wonder the same thing. What I'm afraid is that you took this job so I could go on and have all the

advantages to which my — quote — beauty and brains — unquote — entitle me. I won't have that, Marsh. I mean it."

" No," said Marsh. " All I meant was that it looked like the thing that would work out best for us all."

" Won't do, Son." Mr. Temple dried a glass with unusual care. " You don't plan your life for your parents and sister — not in our set. Your parents don't pick out a career for you in this country, either. The only question that applies is, Did you take up this work because you think it's what you might want to do? If not, you ought to reconsider the whole problem."

" Cryin' out loud! " exclaimed Marsh in despair. " Not that again. I'll accept the responsibility, and no blame to any of you."

5

A SOFT snow was falling, heavy-flaked, when Marsh went upstairs next morning. No one else was stirring, but at his first experimental clank of the percolator Marlou appeared in the kitchen.

" I'll boil up some breakfast," she volunteered. " Why didn't we sleep till eleven o'clock? "

" Don't know about you," Marsh answered, " but I hope to have my jeep rolling in an hour. Want the first ride? "

" As a ride, no," said the girl. " As an honor, yes. I'll get my arctics."

Heavily bundled, they set out on foot for Linck's garage, the air nipping their cheeks and noses despite the nearness of June.

" This snow will probably cover the gitters," Marsh gloomed. " Wonder what Woody does about that? "

" Maybe you use salt in the winter months."

" Around the gitters? I don't see — "

" No! On the animals' tails." Marlou, laughing, dashed away to dodge the snowball Marsh began to pack.

In the garage Marsh devoted himself for a while to wrench and screw driver, and then let the stubby, bat-

tered little vehicle down from its suspending chains and started the motor. It roared with satisfying vigor. He jockeyed the vehicle back and forth across the garage a few times to get the feel of the clutch and the complicated three-way shifting.

" That transmission's tight," Ed Linck advised him. " Don't run 'er more than forty-five for a few hundred miles."

" What an optimist! " scoffed Marlou.

The outside door opened, and Mr. Middlesworth walked in.

" We're having trouble again, Marsh," he said. " Bad losses night before last, and worse last night. Guess you can't do much in this weather, but I thought I'd tell you."

" Do you know if the gitters have been fired again? " asked Marsh.

" I can hardly ever find them," Mr. Middlesworth groaned, " but two or three I located had been fired."

" No dead coyotes around? "

The rancher shook his head.

Marsh said slowly: " I don't know, Mr. Middlesworth. Seems to me sometimes I'm not doing you any good at all. I get to wondering why I ever got into this business."

" Maybe I'm partly responsible, Marsh. But I'm not kicking. Why not let it ride until Woodford comes again? He may have some idea."

Marsh nodded. " If that's all right with you," he agreed. " Woody'll be here early Monday, I think."

Watching Mr. Middlesworth leave, Marsh was abashed at his own loss of heart. He had noticed before how ranchers often accept a measure of adversity with remarkable patience. Maybe you learned that making your living from the soil.

Marlou swung up the garage door, returned to the jeep, climbed in, and braced her feet. "You may fire when ready, Gridley," she announced. "Nothing like fresh air, I always say."

Marsh drove out to the street and along the state highway. Snow lashed at them, for the jeep had no nonessentials such as a top, and they tightened parka hoods about their faces.

"This," Marlou cried, raising her voice above the rush of the storm, "strengthens my determination to be a newspaperwoman in a nice, steam-heated office."

"Where's your vim, vigor, and vitality?" scoffed Marsh. But he added, "Any time you want to go back —"

"You want to talk?"

"It'd help. I think better out loud, and I sure don't want to wait for Woody."

"How come?"

"He and Mr. Killion say if the interference continues I've got to arrest the criminal. Federal prison. Fort Leavenworth."

"Not really!"

Marsh nodded. "It sounds like something out of a B movie to me too. Until I pinch myself, that is, and then it's me and Gus, and I start sweating."

"Maybe it isn't Gus. Maybe it's one of the Mexicans."

"It's Gus," Marsh said bleakly. "I know nobody watched where I put this bunch of gitters, and Gus is the only guy around with enough knowledge of wildlife to locate gitters by figuring where they ought to be."

"Does your hunting mean Gus will have to stop hunting?"

"Of course not. I'll go only where I'm called, which

will leave him hundreds of square miles. I don't understand why he keeps crowding me. Surely he read Mr. Killion's letter in the paper."

Marlou was thoughtful. " Maybe he also read Mr. Ledington's letter, and got some misguided notion of carrying the torch for a free country. Or maybe he just wants to show you he can outsmart you. He doesn't know you're on his trail, does he? "

" No. Maybe if he did — " Marsh turned the jeep in a decisive circle. " I'm going out to Garvers' and tell Gus what the score is in plain words. Maybe I'm breeding a scab on my nose, but at least I'll feel better if I give him fair warning."

He dropped Marlou at the *Tribune* office and drove on out toward Geehaw Creek. The storm began to slacken, though the ground was heavily blanketed. As he crossed the valley of Gee Fork, the buildings of the Goodhues' Ladder G Ranch were snug squares off to his right, smoke curling comfortably from the chimneys.

He crossed a ridge, the valley of Haw Fork, another ridge, and then turned into a side road down the upper canyon of Arroyo Manzanita. He was twenty miles from home. It was big country, but it was his territory. The thought still gave him a lift.

Three miles along this road Marsh came to the Garvers' " claim shack." There were a dozen like it in the Basin, and, indeed, such buildings are scattered over the whole West, most of them now deserted and all of depressing sameness in construction and appearance. They were exactly fourteen by sixteen feet, to meet the Government requirements for a homestead claim, and made of foot-wide boards nailed upright and covered with black tar paper.

Marsh surveyed the drooping corners of torn tar paper, thinking of the substantial log buildings of most ranches — the Goodhues', for instance — and found the picture before him so dreary that not even the sun struggling through a break in the storm clouds gave him any real cheer.

The shack door opened as he stopped; a mongrel dog barked sullenly around a corner of the house. It was Red Garver, not Gus, who bulked in the doorway.

" Well, come in, come in," Red called heavily. " I can't git around much."

Reluctantly, Marsh entered. " Good morning, Mr. Garver." He was surprised to find the barren interior fairly clean. As much could not be said for Gus's dad.

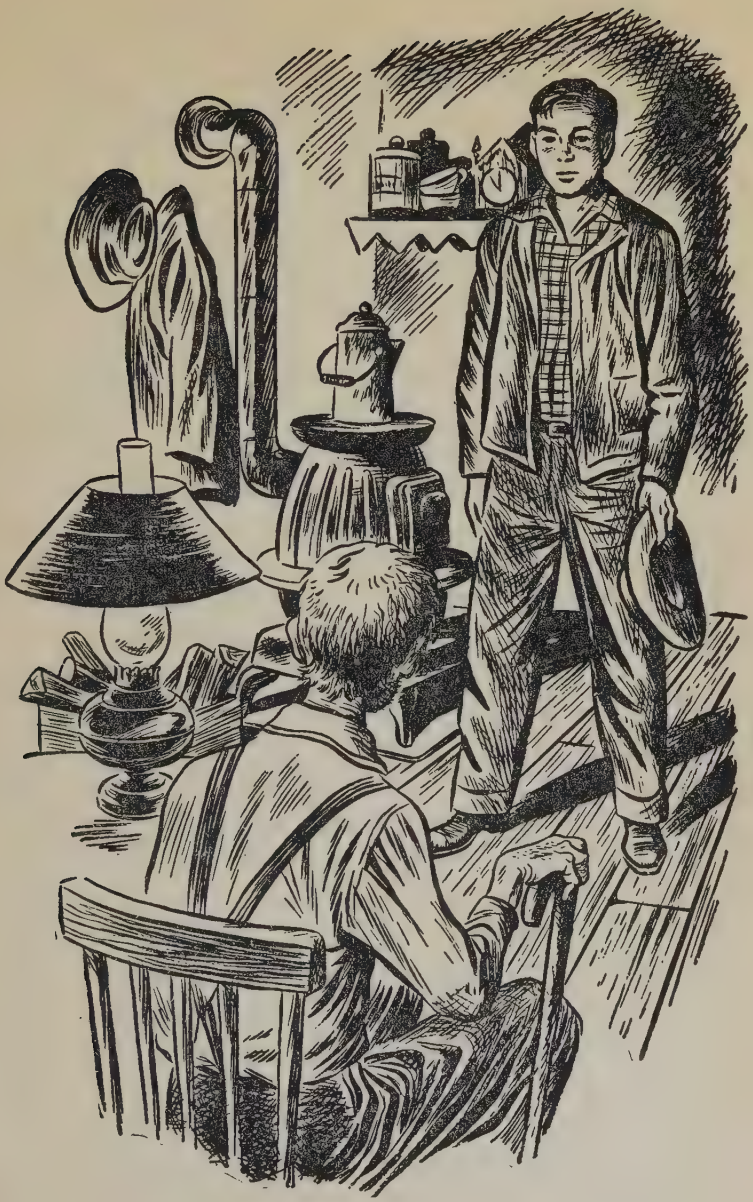
" Nothin' good about this kind o' weather when you got rheumatism," growled the elder Garver. " The damp gives me fits."

He was the shuffling hulk of a once big man, now bent and thin and propped on a cane. He had not shaved for a week, and his gray-powdered red hair was long uncut.

" Storm seems to be letting up," Marsh said, in a vague attempt to be cheerful.

Red Garver said sharply: " You got a steady job, ain't yuh? No reason why that cussed kid o' mine cain't settle down and git work. I tell him he'll never amount to nothin' long as he prowls around the hills and hangs out at that blasted pool hall the whole time. He could jist as well have a car too, and maybe I could get out oncet in a while, if he had any gumption. But he pays me no mind, and I ain't man enough no more to whale some sense into him."

Marsh stood fumbling with his hat, finding the heat of the " monkey " stove increasingly oppressive. He couldn't



agree with the man that his own son was worthless, and yet he couldn't honestly say Red Garver was wrong. Marsh miserably wished himself a thousand miles away. He didn't understand this kind of feeling between father and son.

" I wanted to see Gus, Mr. Garver," he got out finally.

" He ain't here. Hardly ever is, far as that goes. Oh, he'll bring me in some grub, when it gits low. Reckon he wouldn't see me starve. But unless the huntin's been extra good, like this month, he don't never have no money to bring home. What yuh want to see him for? "

Marsh hesitated, then side-stepped. " I thought he might give me some pointers on reading sign. One place has got me stumped, and Gus is good at trailing."

" Ought to be. Never studied nothin' else. Gus could help you out all right. Next time he comes home, I'll tell him you need him."

" Or I may come across him," Marsh replied, and got out as fast as he could.

He headed the jeep back up the road toward Chiricahua, his thoughts rattling around as disconnectedly as some loose tools on the back floor of his little vehicle. His evasion of the truth to Mr. Garver was an ugly taste in his mouth. He was used to complete honesty. Yet how could you deal straightforwardly with a man like Red Garver? If his own dad took that attitude, Marsh knew with sudden clarity that he'd duck out of telling the truth himself. You couldn't talk out a problem with a parent like Red.

The storm had broken away overhead, but clouds were drifting lazily down the valley floors of Haw Fork and Gee Fork. Marsh drove through the clouds, emerging into a steaming, drenched world where the roads made him thankful for the big lug treads on the tires of the jeep.

He pulled up in front of his own house and went in for lunch. His father and Marlou had already returned to the *Tribune* office, but Mom had put a plate back in the oven.

" I hope your vehicle is better in performance than in appearance," she said. " Couldn't you get a top and side curtains? "

" Oh, it'll soon be summer," said Marsh. " It took me out to Garvers' and back. Gus wasn't home. Can't say I blame him." He told of his call on Gus's father. " I never realized there could be that kind of feeling between a guy and his dad."

Mom nodded understandingly. " It must have been a jolt. You recognize the clatter, though, don't you? "

Marsh looked up, puzzled at this disconcerting feminine short cut in thought.

" It's like washing dishes," his mother explained. " If a person is clumsy, he makes a good deal of clatter, so it sometimes sounds as if he's breaking china when he's only trying to get it clean."

Marsh munched a few bites of sandwich before he gave it up. " Hanged if I know what you're talking about," he admitted, irritated at his own slowness of mind.

" About Gus and his dad," Mom said patiently. " Every parent and every child, I suppose, have difficulties in understanding each other. But some, being awkward in trying to work it out, make it sound like a dog fight. It sounds to me as if actually Gus and his father think a good deal of each other."

" Where on earth do you get that? "

" Didn't Red say Gus wouldn't see him starve? And he got all proud about how Gus could help you."

" Well, cryin' out loud! I never caught on at all. And

he admitted when the hunting was good like this month Gus brought money — Hey! Where you suppose Gus is getting money? "

" From Mr. Wagner, I should think," Mom answered.

" That's it! " Marsh snapped his fingers. " That's what I'll do! "

" Now what are we talking about? " queried Mrs. Temple, in her turn.

" Mr. Wagner. I'll ask him to wise up Gus that if he's tampering with Government traps and gitters he'll land himself in jail. Gus'll listen to Mr. Wagner."

" More than he would to you, certainly."

Marsh pushed back his chair. " Thanks, Mom, for the idea *and* the lunch."

There were no customers at the Wagner Wool and Hide when he parked the jeep in front. Ranchers who'd made their Saturday trip to town in the morning had been there earlier, and those who waited until after dinner would not arrive for a while. But there was a big stack of miscellaneous hides on the platform, and inside Marsh found Ivan Wagner busy over a stack of papers at his desk.

The man looked up as he entered, and his bushy black brows straightened into an unfriendly dark line. " What do you want, Marsh? "

Marsh said: " I'd like to ask a favor, Mr. Wagner. Somebody's tampering with the gitters up at Mr. Middlesworth's, and I've got a strong notion it's Gus Garver. Somebody ought to get it across to him that he's setting himself up for Federal arrest and imprisonment."

" Why are you telling me? "

Marsh chose his words carefully. " Gus respects you, and he likes you because you buy his furs. He'd listen — "

" Are you insinuating I've had anything but straight business dealings with Gus? "

" Why, no," Marsh answered. " But you did do him a favor about that Government pelt, and he ought to appreciate — "

" So that's it. You've decided it was Gus I bought that pelt from, and I protected him. So you've got something on both of us. Is your notion that Gus is firing your gitters based on the same kind of guesswork? "

" No. I haven't got any legal evidence, but the things I do know add up. The point is, I don't want to have to go after evidence and prosecute Gus, or anybody else. I don't want to be known as a law officer."

Wagner nodded. " That would cook your goose in the Basin, wouldn't it? People don't want another Federal agency telling 'em what they can and can't do — not if they see it coming. So I have no doubt your orders are to worm your way in without offending anybody." Wagner came to his feet.

" I've got no use for your program. Or anybody connected with it. I agree with John Ledington that your father had no business agitating in the paper to get a hunter in here."

" You can leave my father out of it! " Now Marsh was angry.

" He was in it from the beginning. For thirty years or more these hunters have been destroying the fur trade. Taking animals out of season, scalping them, and leaving the carcasses to rot because the fur was no good. Flooding the market with pelts till they had no value. Fur is a crop, and, if it's harvested properly, a permanent crop. But these people have just mowed it down, irresponsibly. The Basin was one place in the United States they hadn't got

to, until your father brought 'em in."

" It was the ranchers who brought them in."

" Then get the ranchers to talk to Gus," Wagner shot back. " I'll have no part in putting the Basin in your clutches, and I'll not be accused of having connections with a lawbreaker."

" I — " Marsh gave it up. He strode out to his jeep, gunned it furiously as he spun around and roared down the street.

Monday morning Marsh was in the yard tightening the last bolt on the gunrack above the instrument panel of the jeep when Woody arrived at the Temple home.

" Hi, trapper," the man saluted. " Ready to start? "

" Not quite," Marsh answered. " I've got to get the gear boxes fastened into the back, and — "

" This thing run? "

" It does." Marsh was emphatic.

" That rifle shoot? "

" You're not foolin'. Yesterday evening I picked a gallon can off a fence post at four hundred yards on the sixth shot."

" Likely you'll improve with practice," Woody teased. " But if this runs and that shoots, you're set to go. Want your stuff in the chicken house? "

" Stuff? "

" Traps, gitters, trap pads, cartridges, scent. Have to keep stocked up yourself now. I've got the truck loaded."

They stored what seemed to Marsh to be a mountain of supplies before Woody took a bulging letter file from the cab.

" Here're your blanks and forms and instruction circulars. You'll see what they're for. Fill out requisitions for equipment and supplies and get 'em in quick. You'll

never again have the experience of receivin' materials before you order 'em."

" I'll check over and make a list at once."

" Not that quick. Right now we start trappin'. I've only got today here, and you can always take care of paper work nights or during bad weather. Let's go."

" Go where? " Marsh asked.

" Where the coyotes howl. You know your trouble spots, I hope."

Marsh said soberly, " The gitters at Middlesworths' have been fired again."

Abruptly Woody's amiable expression faded. For a full minute he said nothing. Then, " Well, that's where we start."

They swung into the bucket seats and Marsh spun his little vehicle out of the yard toward the highway. Woody grasped the handgrip and planted his feet.

" Flies low," he called above the rush of air around the windshield. " My mind's relieved. I doubted it'd move. Got a horse trailer yet? "

" Horse trailer! Cryin' out loud! " Marsh had enough left from his bank loan for incidentals until his first payday, and that was about all.

" You'll go as far as you can in this," Woody said, " carryin' Oatbin behind. Then you hit the saddle. Have to make time on this job."

" I can see that," Marsh agreed dryly.

What he didn't see was how he was going to get hold of a horse trailer. Already he'd gone heavily into debt to equip himself for this job, and if he didn't make good or the job didn't last, he was going to end up holding the sack.

Woody said: " This is a good will call, purely to keep

Mr. Middlesworth's confidence. You and I've got to get down to cases. What's goin' on up here? "

Marsh took a minute to sort his ideas, knowing a moment's relief, as he did so, that he needn't reopen his endless inner debate about his own future.

He said, " You met a fellow named Gus Garver." He told of following the horse tracks and his glimpse in the dusk of somebody who had been spying on him.

Woody shook his head. " Won't do. Nothin' there that'd stand up in court. He still hasn't stolen any gitters or traps that might be found in his possession? "

" No," said Marsh, " and he brushes out his own footprints."

After a period of thought Woody said: " You should have got more fur, with all the gitters we put out. I'll bet this Gus has picked up some of your coyotes. Where would he dispose of 'em? "

Marsh knew uneasiness. " At the Wagner Wool and Hide in town. Mr. Wagner used to buy my pelts too."

" Then get Mr. Wagner to work with you."

" That's no go. He's dead set against Government hunting. He's told me off about it three different times."

" The plot thickens," observed Woody. " Well, here's Mr. Middlesworth. I'll talk to him."

They stood on the east side of the machine shed. There the sun was warm and the log building cut off the blast of the high west wind that today was heralding the end of winter.

" Mainly this is Marsh's problem," said Woody. " What he needs from you, Mr. Middlesworth, is the assurance that you'll back him up. If he could get his case established, for instance, and then you'd not want to testify against a local boy."

" I'd not like being the one to send Gus to reform school or prison," the rancher admitted, " but I believe in the Service, and I'll back Marsh any day. A youngster that does some good with the opportunities he gets is the fellow for my money. You see, a few years back I took a flier in blooded horses. One of the mares got sick, and the day after she foaled, she died. Colt was mighty puny, and I intended to shoot it; but Marsh was visiting, and he took a fancy to it. I gave it to him, and he took it home and raised it up by hand."

" That's Oatbin," said Marsh. " He was worth saving."

" As strong and smart a saddle horse as there is in the county," agreed Mr. Middlesworth. " But you get my point, Woodford. I figure Marsh is worth more to the community than Gus, if it has to come to that, same as I figure a sheep is worth more to the Basin than a coyote."

" I don't look for Marsh to let you down," smiled Woody, and extended his hand.

Marsh was really feeling good as he headed his jeep downhill. Riding high!

" So Ledington, this man Wagner, and Gus Garver are buckin' you," Woody mused aloud. " Well, you certainly didn't get a soft spot. But let's look over the whole proposition, and maybe we'll think of somethin' as we go along. Where is this mountain lion ragin'? "

" Head of Chico Creek. But that's twenty-five miles, and no road."

" You're a Government hunter now," Woody told him pointedly. " Let's go."

Marsh said, " The lion's not bothering anything but deer."

" Don't say ' anything but deer,' " Woody scolded. " Game belongs to the people of Colorado, your most nu-

merous clients, and their losses are as important as any you have in your territory."

There it was again, " Your territory." These words did something to Marsh. He turned north up a country road, but at the fork of Piñon Creek Woody called a halt.

" How can we get nearest to the bluff country yonder? "

Marsh pondered. " Up Piñon. There's a road for a ways, and then an old logging trail. But those cliffs are clear over in San Rafael County."

" County lines mean nothin' to a lion, nor to a Government hunter, any more than distance. Those cliffs are prime lion country, and he'll range out of them for miles."

Marsh shoved the jeep into the low range and took off up the uncertain road.

Woody asked presently, " What's this Garver got against you? "

" We never had any trouble," said Marsh, " until that first day you came. I haven't seen him to talk to since."

" Has he got it in for Middlesworth? "

" All I know about that too is what you heard."

" I'm tryin'," said Woody, " to figure out what I'd do if I was a horse..Meanin' Gus, in this case."

Marsh cautiously maneuvered the jeep past a washed-out spot before he answered. " This is different. Gus generally has never before stayed with any one thing more than a couple of weeks."

The road came to an end, but Marsh managed to negotiate an overgrown logging trail for several miles more. Finally he simply started out through the forest, twisting among the trees and around boulders. At last a narrowing of the canyon stopped them.

" This'll do," said Woody. " My stomach says lunch time."

Marsh glanced at the wrist watch that had been his family's graduation present, and verified the hour.

They found a pleasant clearing beside the stream, washed, and ate their sandwiches. For a few minutes they lay relaxing in the clear sunlight, with Piñon Creek brawling among its stones, the wind muted thunder in the tall pine tops, and a camp robber screaming " Jay! Jay! Jay! " as it flashed in a vivid blue streak from tree to tree.

" Sometimes," Woody drawled lazily, " you'll feel sorry for everybody else in the world that can't live a hunter's life."

Marsh looked at him quickly, wondering if the man had read his doubts as to what he should do with himself. But Woody seemed only to be enjoying the moment.

Presently they put their lunch pails back in the jeep and, carrying their rifles, set off up the slope. Woody moved ahead, intent, giving no attention to trifles like grade and footing.

" Where would deer travel through this country? " he asked.

" Across that saddle yonder," answered Marsh, getting his breath, " and down through the clearings to the crick."

" Your lion'll sashay along one side of their trail," Woody said, " from that rocky point to the one across the crick, always on the lookout for a handy rock or tree from which to jump down on his dinner."

They climbed to the low point of the ridge and Woody stopped.

" This is what I wanted to show you." He pointed to a number of small mounds in a scratched up area two yards

square. " Lion scratch hills. Every time he comes this way, the cat'll stop to make another one and investigate these. Likely an old kill around too."

" Good place to set a trap? " asked Marsh.

" Maybe. A lion's not strong on fixed routes. This is very old sign. He may not come this way again all summer. When you can get in here on horseback, range on up and try to strike a fresh kill. If he's scratched pine needles and stuff over it, he intends to come back. Use Number 4½ traps. Study your Circular Number 6 tonight."

" Study! " groaned Marsh. " Can anything else happen to me? "

Woody laughed. " Plenty. Your traps may not do the job, in which case you'll have to get hold of somebody with some Walker hounds or other huntin' dogs."

As they headed the jeep back toward Chiricahua, Woody said, " I'm tryin' to figure out in my mind what keeps bitin' Gus."

Marsh reminded him grimly: " Both John Ledington and Ivan Wagner have made it clear they want no Government hunter in the Basin. I've tried to study out what Ledington or Wagner might do. They'd get nowhere just asking the Fish and Wildlife to quit while requests for help from Mr. Middlesworth and Mr. Ringland and Mr. Rapelli were still on file. So what *would* you do if you wanted to stop the predator control program? "

" Where would I go if I was a horse, huh? " Woody's eyes twinkled.

" Something like that. Their only choice is to turn people against the Service or against me personally, and egging on Gus Garver does it."

" I don't follow you," said Woody.

" If Gus were facing Federal prison, a lot of people would feel mighty sorry for him. He's a chronic down-and-outer. I'd be about as popular as if I went around kicking dogs. Nobody'd call me if coyotes were killing off everything they owned. So where does that leave me except out, and the Service along with me? "

Woody said thoughtfully: " Ledington didn't impress me as the kind that would get a kid in trouble to have his own way. I don't know this Wagner, of course."

They stopped at Chiricahua, and Woody got his truck for the trip to Rapellis'. Marsh followed in his jeep. When he rejoined Woody at Fort Royal, the Government man was preoccupied.

" I've got this much clear," Woody said finally; " if this interference keeps up, your huntin's not worth two whoops in Texas."

Marsh felt the bite of sudden anger. " So I'm hanged if I do and hanged if I don't. It's either Gus or me! "

" I don't see as you've got much choice. You can't go on like this, so you'll have to put a stop to the tamperin'. That's unless you just want to give the whole thing up as a losin' proposition."

Marsh didn't trust himself to answer.

At Rapellis' they started out across the pasture to look at the cat traps Marsh had set. At sight of the first one, the boy gave an angry exclamation. It was sprung and empty.

Woody burst out laughing. " That's a horse on you, Marsh. Your first boner. Everybody has to make the first one. You can relax now."

Marsh was stiff and flushed.

" You turned the long springs out, pointin' the way the cat comes from. Blamed careless cat that wouldn't feel

the springs, or jiggle the trap, before he stepped on the pan. Start settin' 'em with the springs turned back and you'll start takin' cats, I bet."

" Why couldn't this add in with the fired gitters and all the rest of it? " Marsh demanded defensively.

" This is only a plain technical error and the strychnine pellet is still attached, which it wouldn't be if you'd caught anything."

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh was disgusted with himself. He slammed the trap open and reset it, taking care to turn it the other way.

" If you never make any worse bobble than that," Woody told him, " you'll be a proved genius."

They returned to the house. Marsh dreaded to meet Mr. Rapelli and tell him what had happened.

" You have any-a luck? " asked Mr. Rapelli hopefully. " Another billy goat I lost-a day before yesterday evening."

" I don't think you'll lose many more." Woody's voice was confident. " We fixed up the sets a little. I think we'll soon have your troubles taken care of."

Marsh gunned the jeep out of the yard with mixed feelings — gratitude that Woody had covered up his mistake, pride that still stung because of the hunter's laughter.

" Make a perfect line," Woody called through the wind stream.

Marsh's eyes were a question.

Woody gestured backward with his head. " Trap line. Loop out north from Middlesworths' and back around to the river east of Chiricahua. Then on south through the hills to Rapellis'. If a man had a set at every likely crossing and covered the route maybe once a week — be a

pleasure for any hunter to work."

Marsh went over the route mentally. "That'd be something over forty miles," he estimated.

"It'd take time, gettin' permission from every owner or lessee where you had to cross land or wanted to make a set on it, pickin' your spots, and plantin' your traps or gitters."

"How many sets would you make in that distance?"

"I build a line up gradually," said Woody. "Whenever I can spare a day, I stick half a dozen traps and two or three dozen gitters in my saddlebags and start out. Over a period of time an operation like that'd cut down the numbers of predatory animals in the Basin till what was left would have plenty of natural prey. Men like Rapelli or Middlesworth could raise stock in peace."

Marsh slowed suddenly, realizing he was in Fort Royal and exceeding the speed limit. He had been taking, in his mind's eye, a long jaunt across the wild heart of Chiricahua Basin. He parked across the street from Woody's truck and got out with the hunter.

"Well, Marsh," the man asked, "what are your plans?"

"I'm sticking," Marsh answered. "I'll stop Gus."

"Good! If I was a horse named Garver, I'd keep on the prowl and never let Temple out of my sight. Every time I saw him make a set, I'd get back at night and set it off."

"Only some night before long," Marsh predicted, "you'd find yourself outprowled, and Temple waiting for you."

"That's the idea," Woody grinned, "One thing more, though — be sure you get evidence you can make stick in court. Have your proof absolutely airtight. As a witness,

your word is no better than his. Catch him in the act or, better yet, in possession of Government property. If you don't, you might make a fool of yourself."

" I'll watch it," Marsh promised, and started for home.

He was almost late for dinner. Not until the first pangs of hunger were quieted did he notice that the table was unusually silent.

" What's wrong? " he asked. " I haven't heard you all so quiet since Marlou got my table manners straightened out."

Marlou told him. " The Wagner Wool and Hide ad was canceled today. Permanently."

Marsh laid down his fork. " On account of me? "

Mr. Temple pushed back his plate. " No. Ivan is opposed to Government hunting, and the *Tribune* promoted it. So he's doing no more business with the *Tribune.*"

Bleakness spread through Marsh. " You came out for Government hunting two months ago," he reminded his father. " The ad was canceled today — my first day as a full-time hunter."

" The policy of the paper hasn't changed."

" You don't need to keep on being decent about it," Marsh said bitterly, " just so I can make like Buffalo Bill. If I'm going to get us enemies all over the county and lose us business, I can find another job."

" In the newspaper business? " inquired Dad.

" Why? " said Marsh.

" Because if you're not, the policy of the *Tribune* is my responsibility. Nobody likes losing twenty-five dollars a month income, but I won't be told how I can or can't speak up editorially for any amount. That's basic to my line of work."

" But — "

" You go ahead and quit the Fish and Wildlife Service if you want to; but if you do, I'm going to devote a good deal of space to the need for another hunter in here."

For some minutes Marsh sat in frowning thought. Something had started in the Basin, it was plain, that couldn't be stopped.

" O.K.," he said; " I'm sticking. So it's every man for himself."

" Yea! " applauded Marlou. " And women and children first."

6

IN THE bright sunshine of early morning Marsh stood in the door of the ex-chicken-house and studied a problem he hadn't seen before. He had a number of things to do — organize his equipment, get after the mountain lion, reset the traps at Rapellis', start his pursuit of Gus — and he didn't know where to begin. It hadn't occurred to him that one important phase of a hunter's work would be organizing his time so he'd accomplish the most.

Still without much plan, he loaded some equipment in the jeep, racked his rifle, and drove off trying to feel purposeful. He stopped at the garage for gas, pulling in beside a sleek, powerful new pickup with the Ladder G brand stenciled on the doors, a saddle pony in a horse trailer behind it. Bill Goodhue and his father were standing by the truck.

Bill shoved his Stetson back on his blond hair, and with no word of greeting walked slowly all round the jeep. He peered at it from every angle, stooping and craning his neck, while Marsh waited, grinning. Finally Bill straightened.

" Pedals? " he asked solemnly. " Or do you push with

your hind foot? "

Marsh gave a shout and let fly a well-directed kick. Bill deftly caught Marsh's boot in mid-air, and for a few seconds kept him crowhopping about the driveway.

" It's jealousy that's got me in this weakened state," Marsh explained as they got their breath. " At sight of your horse trailer."

" Need to carry Oatbin around with you, Marsh? " Mr. Goodhue asked.

Marsh nodded. " All that's lacking from my outfit."

" Dad," said Bill, " what about that old two-horse job at the north line camp? We're not using it now."

" The thing about Bill is," Mr. Goodhue told Marsh with that sidelong humor so dear to the heart of the cattle country, " he's generous to a fault. This trailer he's talking about has got two flat tires and a broken tie rod and a jammed catch on the tail gate. Bill's got you all fixed up."

" It's better than what Marsh has got now," retorted Bill, " which is no horse trailer at all."

" How much would you sell it for, Mr. Goodhue? " asked Marsh. " If my credit's any good, I mean. I'm broke till payday."

" We'll need it for a few days during fall roundup," Mr. Goodhue answered, " and next winter to take some gaited stuff to the stock show. But if you want to put it in running order, Marsh, it's yours to keep except for these times when I need it."

" Golly! " exclaimed Marsh. " That's a godsend."

" I'll pilot you out there right now," Bill offered. " My curiosity about this king-size roller skate you're driving's got the best of my judgment."

" Go you one better," Marsh offered. " You can drive."

Bill hopped in eagerly.

By noon Marsh was home with his prize. It had been, he figured, a morning well spent. With new tires, which he could get from Ed Linck on credit, and a day's repair work, he'd have the problem of a conveyance for Oatbin licked. But more than that, the time with Bill Goodhue had been like clear sunshine, showing up a world of dark threats and looming problems in true focus.

Marsh had at last formed a definite plan of action. After lunch he drove up to Middlesworths', got Oatbin, and rode around the outside of the ranch, setting and reloading gitters as he went. He took no guard and made no effort to conceal his movements.

That evening after dinner he said to the family, casually he hoped, " Think I'll run back up to Middlesworths' and see if I can't get a line on which way the coyotes come in on the flocks, and maybe make a few sets accordingly."

His father looked at him keenly.

Mom asked, " Is it safe, handling those cartridges in the dark? "

" I'll go along," volunteered Marlou, " and hold a flashlight."

" Wanting that bad to get out of the dishes? " Marsh asked.

" Never mind the dishes tonight." This was from Mom. " I'd feel better if you're together."

Dad considered. " Wear jeans and boots, Marlou."

Marlou went to her room to change.

When the twins returned to the living room, Marsh heard his father say, " He'll take fewer chances with her to look out for." Marsh wondered if he was supposed to hear that. He crossed the river and turned west toward the vague bulk of Oroblanco Range.

" What do you think of my mechanical bronc? " he asked.

" Cute as a bug's ear," Marlou conceded. " I also think you're not starting out at this time of night just to observe how a papa coyote provides for mama coyote and all the itsy-bitsy coyotes."

" The trouble with a twin," Marsh grumbled, " you never have a secret you can call your own."

" You're telling me! But no kid, Marsh."

" O.K., no kid." For years they had used the two-word signal as a sort of " King's X " in their banter. " I made some sets today with no try to keep Gus from watching me. I intended to go see if he'd come back to 'em tonight."

" I had a hunch something like that was in the wind. Little sister's going right along to bring you back alive."

" Oh, no, you're not. You're stopping off for a nice visit with Mrs. Middlesworth."

" Oh, no, yourself. You've included me in all of it. I'm not going to be left out of the excitement. We'll be in sight of the ranch in a moment. Can you drive without lights? "

Marsh wasn't quite sure. " I guess so. There's half a sliver of moon, and the stars are out."

Marlou seemed to have blandly taken command. " Let's approach without lights. Easy. Let me out at the gate, and you slip on up to the southwest corner. We can go along the fence on foot and meet somewhere on the south line."

" Now hold on," Marsh sputtered. " Who's running this show? I can't let you go prowling out there alone."

" My hero! " scoffed Marlou. " Since when have I had to have you take care of me? "

" But you're a girl."

" Have been for years," Marlou agreed cheerfully. " But I'm as old as you, lacking forty-five minutes, and you think I'm scared of Gus Garver after all the time I spent in the same playpen with you? "

" You could always outtalk me." Marsh gave in, switched off the jeep's lights, and slowed. " You take my rifle with you."

" O.K. I wish you had a gun too."

" Don't need one," said Marsh. " What I had in mind before you got me sidetracked was just to see what goes on tonight. If Gus shows up, I'll come back tomorrow night with witnesses. Got to have an airtight case, Woody says. Tonight we don't even let Gus know he's being watched, let alone start anything." He stopped and Marlou swung out, accepting the rifle he handed her.

" The old whistle when we meet," she said. " I wouldn't want to shoot you by mistake."

Anxiety came to Marsh's face as he watched her merge with the shadows of manzanita and chico brush. They'd played games like this years ago but, doggone it, this was no game. He wished he could have talked her out of it, but at the same time he admired her spirit. He drove on as fast as he dared.

He concealed the jeep among some trees and started back to meet Marlou. He eased from shadow to shadow, from tree to rock to brush, placing his feet, toe down first, for silence. He scanned every inch of his surroundings that he could see. The minutes stalked on, soundless except for the night call of a bird and the faint, far cry of a coyote on a distant hill to the north. An hour had passed since he had left his sister.

Abruptly Marsh came to a halt and held his breath.

Had he heard a shot? Straight ahead, far ahead? He tossed caution aside and ran, hating himself that he'd let Marlou have her way. He'd been expecting to meet her any minute, but the shot had been faint and distant.

In mid-stride he tried to stop, and stumbled. Before him a shadow leaped to life and he heard a startled oath.

The shadow started to flee. Marsh had a glimpse of a horse fidgeting in the brush. But where was Marlou? He raced after the fleeing figure.

Ten yards short of the horse Marsh leaped in a flying tackle. His arms found a body and he and the figure fell with stunning force. Marsh pushed up, and a driving fist, or boot, caught him alongside the face and sent him sprawling. He rolled on his shoulders and lunged to his feet, his ears ringing, and plowed in again, weaving and ducking.

Blows crashed on his back and shoulders. His fists

found a target and he drove his punches from the waist. He could hear his antagonist grunt at the impacts. A clout on his neck half dazed him. He gathered his feet and charged, football style.

They went down again, but this time Marsh was on top. He clutched with his left hand, closed on hair. He started punching with his right, sometimes smashing dirt and sometimes flesh. A sob broke from his victim.

" All right, Marsh," said a voice. " I've got him covered."

The words brought him to his feet. " Marlou! " he panted. " Are you all right? "

" All right," said his twin. " You on the ground! You're Gus Garver, I suppose, since it's Gus's horse in the brush. I've got a rifle on you, do you understand? " A safety release snapped. " Get up, Gus, and no tricks! Are you all right, Marsh? "

" Better than Gus, anyway." Marsh was breathing hard. " Up on your feet, Gus, and shut up."

For the hulking fellow was muttering curses. " You never seen me do nothin'," he half whimpered. " You jumped me and beat me up while your sister held a gun on me. You never seen me do nothin'."

Marsh grunted. " You want to bet a Federal court'll believe that? " He turned to Marlou, and extended his hand for the rifle. Feet scuffed suddenly behind him, and he whirled about, ready. Gus had almost reached his horse and was clutching for the saddle horn.

Marsh snatched the rifle from his sister. But Gus had been given time. Flattened out along the pinto's neck he thundered into the night.

" Stop! " Marsh shouted once, and brought the rifle to his shoulder.

" Marsh! " cried Marlou. " No! "

He was lowering the gun to the ground even as she spoke. No, he couldn't shoot.

They stood without speaking while the muffled drumming of the pinto's hoofs faded into the darkness. The distant, eerie cry of the same coyote far off to the north reached Marsh's ears again and he realized, suddenly, that his head was throbbing.

" It doesn't matter," Marlou said, her voice as limp as he felt. " You can pick him up any time, now. Or maybe even have the sheriff do it."

Marsh tried to think. His head felt jarred loose from its moorings. " No good," he said. " Gus has got a point. I didn't see him touch a gitter. I came tearing along and he started to run and I jumped him. Couldn't prove a thing in court. Was that — I thought it was — you shooting the rifle? Scared me stiff. I was getting to you fast as I could."

" I seem to have messed things up, but good." The girl was near to tears. " Now you'll never be able to come back with witnesses and take him in the act."

" Ah, that's O.K.," Marsh muttered. After a minute he cried: " Hey, no! You fixed it up, kid. He won't come back. Notice he made the break when I mentioned Federal court? He's scared off for good. I don't have to arrest him and get people feeling I kicked the guy when he was down. Say, this is swell! "

" You're not just trying to make me feel good? "

" Cryin' out loud, don't you see? "

" Well, it was luck and not conduct on my part." Marlou certainly felt better.

" Still comes out O.K.," declared Marsh stoutly. " Let's go home."

They found their home dark and quiet — a house asleep. In the gray dawn Marsh came to the kitchen. Marlou was already there to improve the hasty dressings she had put on his battered face late the night before.

" I can't imagine," she decided, " that anybody will believe you ran into a door in the dark."

Marsh winced as she applied another hot, water-soaked towel. " What *are* we going to tell? " he inquired.

She brought collodion from the medicine cabinet. " To people generally you can say you got gored by a muley cow, or anything to give them politely the idea that it's none of their business."

" But not the folks," said Marsh.

Marlou nodded. " I hear Mom coming."

Mom, in her dressing gown, said from the door: " The energy of you two — Merciful goodness! Marsh! "

" Occupational hazards," Marlou said dryly.

" Great guns! " Another voice had spoken from the doorway.

Marsh grinned lopsidedly at his father. " You should see the other guy."

" And who was the other guy? " Mr. Temple asked.

" Gus Garver." Marsh gave the story of the night.

" It's a mercy nothing worse happened," declared Mom. " You won't have to carry it any farther, will you, Marsh? "

" Not if Mr. Killion and Woody are willing to let it drop. There's always the danger people would start sympathizing with Gus and turn against me and the Service if he were actually sent to the Federal pen."

After breakfast Marsh telephoned to Mr. Killion.

" I was getting ready to come down there," the supervisor said, " but I won't now. We'll hope this takes care of

it. You watch yourself, though."

" What do you mean? " asked Marsh.

" Don't take any chances. That fellow may be scared off, but he may still want to get even. Keep on the alert. If he makes a wrong move, get him."

Marsh hung up, irritated and uneasy. He'd been thinking he had Gus neatly disposed of, and here Mr. Killion considered Gus possibly not disposed of at all. He went out to the yard and started taking dents out of the horse trailer body.

He spent the whole day on the trailer. Perhaps he should have been out in the field, he thought, but he was sore in mind and muscle, and he couldn't do too much until he was able to take Oatbin.

By evening he could stand back, wipe grease from his hands, and survey with some pride a roomy, well-designed conveyance for Oatbin — for two horses, if necessary.

Early next morning he drove up to Middlesworths'. He moved around the boundaries with caution, remembering Mr. Killion's warning. Not many gitters were fired, and he found two dead coyotes, his first in many days. He took only the scalps, for with warm weather the fur was worthless. He loaded and scented the fired gitters, and returned to the ranch house.

With some doubtful snorts, Oatbin allowed himself to be placed in the trailer. Marsh loaded his saddle and other riding gear in the compartment at the trailer's front and returned to town.

At lunch Marlou said, " I suppose a denizen of the wide open won't be home for meals so often? "

" You'd better speak respectfully to me," Marsh re-

torted, " or I won't give you an interview when I capture that lion."

" Let's say ' if.' Speaking of captures, maybe you should talk with John Junior Ledington. He's caught a coyote pup and is making a pet out of it. I'm running a story."

" I imagine it's cute," Mom said. " It would make a good picture, if you could get it to pose."

" Title it ' The Young Killer,' " snapped Marsh. " A coyote wouldn't appeal to me, even if you painted it, Mom. Say, where did John Junior get this pup? "

" In their upper pasture," Marlou told him. " I interviewed him when they were in town yesterday. His folks seemed quite pleased."

Without comment Marsh went out and headed north. So Gus was right! The Ledingtons did harbor denning coyotes on their place.

Even before he reached the end of the old logging trail up Piñon Creek, he found the trailer too bulky to get through. He left it and rode ahead on Oatbin, carrying four Number 4½ traps in his saddlebags.

The farther he went, the more wild and primitive the country became, a tumbled maze of canyons and gulches, with precipitous mighty cliffs and a strewing of house-size boulders. It was heavily wooded with spruce and fir and pine, nearly impassable in places because of down timber.

For a while Marsh tried to hold a fairly straight course. Then he took to riding with the country, following open stretches to cross ridges in the low saddles. Oatbin more or less picked the way, and Marsh kept his eyes to the ground for tracks of deer or lion.

Quite suddenly he came upon the first disaster. The

carcasses of a doe and two fawns were scattered about a tall-grass clearing high on a slope. He got down and prowled the area carefully.

In preparation for this trip Marsh had read enough lion lore to be able to reconstruct the grim drama from the tracks. A buck, two does, and two fawns had been peacefully feeding here. The tawny form of the huge killer cat had stalked unseen on silent pads along the ridge above. The breeze was upslope; the prey had no warning.

Then the flashing, deadly charge. One slash of the great jaws had severed the spine of the first fawn, probably scarce breaking the killer's stride. Its mother evidently had hesitated a fatal second with a futile instinct to help, and had gone down not fifty yards away. The other fawn, confused, had started a circle it had not lived to complete. The buck and the other doe had made their escape.

Anger burned in Marsh. Deer entrails were strewed wastefully around, with only the fat stripped off. This was no kill for a needed meal; it was wanton slaughter. He remembered Woody's words: " Game belongs to the people of Colorado, your most numerous clients, and their losses are as important as any you have in your territory."

Painstakingly Marsh set three of his traps, one close to the largest remaining fragment of each carcass. He pointed the powerful compressed long springs in toward the bodies and spread the scrap-canvas trigger pads with care. The long grass was a handicap, but he decided that moving the carcasses would arouse the killer's suspicions. In the end he took the sods and trimmed off the roots with his knife until only a very thin layer of soil remained. By

the time he had replaced the grass over the hollows containing the traps, certainly no visible sign of his visit remained.

He climbed back to the ridge to get his bearings. In this vast region it could be hard to find this spot again.

" Maybe a lot of work for nothing," he told Oatbin as he mounted. " None of those carcasses had been covered; that means the lion has no intention of coming back here if he can kill somewhere else."

He rode on along the ridge for a while, looking for sign. In a sandy level between two upthrusts of rock he found it: scratch tracks. He studied the round prints, noting that the front paw was nearly as wide as his own hand. After setting more traps, he headed Oatbin in the general direction of the reddish sandstone cliffs that Woody thought might contain the animal's lair.

Marsh discovered no more sign that meant anything to him except for one crossing with scratch hills. He set the rest of his traps there and turned homeward, the sun firing the crest of the Continental Divide west of him. He rode slack, hipped sidewise in the saddle, the fatigue of three hard days' work and one evening's struggle bone-deep in him. Oatbin took his time. Then all of a sudden the horse snorted.

Marsh came erect with a jerk, remembering another evening when his mount had given him a warning. Now the palomino swung his head around to look back the way they had come, tossed his creamy mane, and snorted again.

In one flurry of motion Marsh yanked his rifle from saddle boot, legged over and slid to the ground, swung the horse rapidly into a thicket, and backed in after him. He peered through the gloom until his eyes ached. He

saw exactly nothing.

Oatbin nudged him with an inquiring nose.

" O.K.; we can't stay here all night," Marsh muttered.

He rode away softly through the trees, gun in hand, eyes on his back trail, momentarily expecting he didn't know what. Dusk settled to dark, but Marsh still kept looking back.

" Maybe," he said once aloud, " I've been thinking about Mr. Killion's warning till I've got the jumps. But this is miles from nowhere, and Gus is all-overish like a mosquito at a picnic. Easy, Oatbin."

The horse between his knees still felt fidgety, and Marsh had an increasing but undefined sense of being followed. As he heard Oatbin step into a spongy small meadow, he urged him to a quick gallop. On the other side he stopped short, listening. There was no sound of splash or suck of foot lifted from mud.

The dim forms of the jeep and horse trailer finally loomed in sight. Marsh, working rapidly, got them turned around, his rifle never very far from hand. Oatbin stepped up into his trailer as if appreciating the ride.

Marsh felt a little foolish about his alarm. Probably it was all imagination.

At home he raided the refrigerator, wrote two sentences on his itinerary report, and found himself going to sleep.

Next morning he left Oatbin at home and drove to Rapellis'. Odd how well-groomed and civilized this area seemed after the wilds of yesterday.

At the first trap he leaped forward eagerly. A dead bobcat was held fast in its jaws. Exultantly Marsh took the scalp and tossed the carcass back into the brush. He reset the trap and went around to all the other traps, correct-

ing their position. In that hour he forgave wholeheartedly Woody's laughter at his mistake.

Mr. Rapelli gave a shout of pleasure at sight of the bobcat's scalp. Marsh was sure he wouldn't have received so much congratulation elsewhere if he had captured a whole menagerie.

" By golly, that's-a sure fine. Now I bet we don't lose-a the billy goat again. I like to pay you."

Marsh smiled. " Government's paying me, Mr. Rapelli. You put in your share through taxes somewhere."

" That's-a tax are for some good," Mr. Rapelli declared. " You know, Marsh, we hear-a the coyotes howl at night around here. They don't-a bother so much that we know, except once in a while the chicken or the new kid, but you want-a trap for them? "

Marsh nodded. " I'm planning a line of traps from here north to the river and on around to the Middlesworths'. I'm told that if I thin out the coyotes and cats enough, the ones left will have plenty of natural prey, and won't be so likely to bother the ranchers."

" Marsh, I wish-a you luck."

Marsh returned home full of satisfaction and eager to begin his main trap line. He decided to wait another day before checking his lion sets. Loading his saddlebags as Woody had suggested, he started off to begin his line.

He was greeted cordially by the owners of three small ranches in turn, and all were glad to have him make sets on their land.

This was the routine of a hunter's life, Marsh suspected. To the uninitiated it would have been only an extended horseback ride, with frequent stops to set a gitter, but to Marsh each set was a separate adventure: picking the likely spot near a junction of dim trails; locating

the exact bush or stick or clump of grass that served as a coyote trading post; choosing a particular low-branching piñon tree under which to set a trap that domestic animals would not stray into, though a bobcat crossing from this rocky point to that rocky point would stop to explore.

He moved on through the afternoon, happy to be using his animal knowledge, enjoying the feel of work well done and the prospect of useful results. He left the last ranch and came up into unfenced and unused land. There would have to be a gap in his line here, for the present, because he did not know who owned the land, though it was not far from Ledington's Short Creek Ranch. He fixed the location in his mind so that he could go to the courthouse and find out who owned this stretch.

A shrill yap stopped him short. Looking around, he saw a coyote watching him from the crest of a rise not a quarter of a mile away. Instinctively he snatched his rifle from its boot and leaned forward as Oatbin hit his running stride.

The coyote disappeared. Pounding across the top of the slope, Marsh saw the animal stop on the next crest. At sight of him it turned and slid on over the hill. Marsh urged Oatbin on.

When at the next top the same thing happened again, Marsh pulled up. This was odd business. The coyote had deliberately attracted his attention, which was not in keeping with its usual character. Besides, it had made no effort to take advantage of its long start to effect an escape. Even now Marsh saw it reappear to his left, and higher.

The explanation came to him. A few minutes' exploring back and forth located the animal's tracks and verified his belief. The tracks were the slender and dainty

prints of a she-coyote. Somewhere she had a den she was leading him away from.

Marsh turned and rode back rapidly to the place where he had first seen the coyote. Almost any wild creature, he knew, will do its best to decoy a dangerous intruder away from its nest. So at the moment the she-coyote had barked to attract his attention he must have been pretty "warm."

Soon he dismounted and, leaving Oatbin ground-hitched to graze a little, started backtracking. This was fascinating work. The coyote's footprints showed in the dust only occasionally. Sometimes only a single five-toed front foot had left its mark, but from it he would get a direction, zigzag along the line it set, and finally pick up more sign.

With increasing interest in the puzzle he lost track of time, and to some extent of location. He found where the coyote had come under a barbed-wire fence, and he crawled between the strands, scarcely noticing them.

Abruptly he found a well-worn path thick with coyote prints, and three hundred yards up the hill he found the den. Its doorway was simply a hole of soft earth, and Marsh knelt to listen for pups inside. A muted caterwaul of growlings and whinings reached his ears.

"Are you here in the line of your work, Marsh?" a voice asked.

Marsh sprang up and whirled, coming to his feet as if ready for battle. The jolting unexpectedness of human speech had hit him like a punch, and for a moment his lips moved without the capacity to make a sound.

Then, "Hello, Mr. Ledington," he said. He knew he sounded foolish.

John Ledington said, thin-lipped, "If you are, you're

trespassing on my property." He laid a restraining hand on Fritz's collar, for the dog was nervously sniffing at the coyote tracks.

" I was looking for this coyote den," Marsh said uncertainly. " I didn't realize it was — "

" This land is fenced. I thought everybody in the Basin except Gus Garver respected fences."

At mention of Gus, Marsh felt a fresh beginning of anger.

" I got so interested in tracking the coyote that I crossed your fence without thinking."

" That's symbolic of this work you're doing," Mr. Ledington said sharply. " You've been lured by a boy's natural and wholesome interest in the out of doors into trespassing on God's right to create and destroy. The lobo wolf is already extinct, due to that same misguided zeal, and something challenging and invigorating is gone forever from our forests and mountains. Now you are set to wipe the coyote from the face of the earth — also, as you admit, without thinking."

Marsh wasn't used to having speeches made at him. " All I'm trying to do is protect people's stock."

" So the fat and stupid and docile may multiply freely and live long in the land. Cattle with no need to use their wits or their horns, or do anything else but get sluggish and develop fatty degeneration of the heart. What man cannot subdue and domesticate he must destroy, and then wonder at totalitarian governments."

" I'll get off your land and stay off," Marsh said shortly, returning to what he considered the point. " If you want to raise killers to prey on other people's property, I can't stop you."

He stalked away, climbed through the fence, and

hunted up Oatbin. It was too late to lay more trap line today. All the way home his mind churned with angry, silent debate.

Why, he wondered, couldn't people let him alone to get on with trapping destructive beasts of prey? That was all he wanted to do. Or was it? Was he really surrendering to a foot-loose desire to roam mountain and forest with rifle and horse, free of concern for property lines or other barriers of civilization? Not that again, he groaned.

Next day he returned to the lion country, and retraced the route by which he had left it two evenings before. In the soggy little meadow he came upon tracks. So this was the stalker that had followed him through the darkness. A mountain lion!

" Cryin' out loud," he muttered to himself. " It's not likely this character was only out for a walk. I wonder if it's right that these critters rarely attack a human."

He rode with double caution the rest of the day, but all the day produced was long miles in the saddle for nothing. So far as he could tell, no lion or anything else had been near his traps.

When he arrived at home, he found Mr. Ringland sitting on the front porch in the darkness visiting with his father.

" Heard you were out after my pet peeve," the ranger said to Marsh. " Any luck? "

" Not even a near miss," Marsh admitted ruefully.

" I got back this afternoon from an inspection trip and a visit to the forest guard up in that area. I know of at least five deer killed in the past nine days."

" Wish I knew something more to do." Marsh was unhappy. " The nearest trained lion pack I know of is in Albuquerque."

The ranger left. Marsh ate, came back to the porch, and sat brooding. Mr. Ringland had not said that dogs could be brought from Albuquerque, so the only thing he could do was to set out more traps. His nagging thoughts had led him wrong today. His job was more than footless roaming with horse and gun. This hunting business was just one complication after another, and each complication was fresh worry.

7

MARSH took time for another thorough — and cautious — check of the Middlesworth place. He found no sign of Gus, and in forty-eight hours tallied five coyotes. Here was proof that he could do his job if let alone.

With Oatbin in the trailer he loaded up and headed for the Piñon Creek country, resolved to catch up with the lion if he had to ring the whole Oroblanco National Forest with steel.

Half a mile up the Chico Creek road he suddenly applied the brakes and turned around. Savvy Diaz! Why hadn't he thought of him before? Savvy had dogs trained to hunt bobcats, and Circular Number 6 stated that any good dog might tree a lion. Excitement mounted in him as he drove down the highway to the Tecolote Creek road at a pace that caused Oatbin to point his ears forward.

The upper Tecolote was red-soil country. On both sides of the small creek were fairly high and fairly steep hills covered by piñon and tree sage. Along the bottoms of the dry washes grew juniper and desert cedar, with the tannish native grasses thick in every open space. On a flat where the valley widened Marsh saw the mounds of a prairie-dog town, and several of the little brown owls that

had given the creek its name. There'd be rattlesnakes too, he reflected, and it was prime coyote territory.

Not for some time had Marsh been out this way, and he had forgotten the extent of Don Alberto Diaz's holdings. Fat white-faced cattle watered at the stream and ambled back across the brown pastures. Far ahead a hillside was moving gray with sheep. Horses grazed along a slope off to the east, above the winding bank of an irrigation canal. Below the canal stretched broad meadows, and fields where the dark-pink earth was cultivated. The rambling adobe hacienda was snugged among towering cottonwood trees.

As Marsh pulled into the yard, dogs of all sizes and sorts surrounded him with a clamor of barking, excited rather than angry. Savvy appeared beside the barn, dispersed the dogs with a terrific burst of Spanish, and waved amiably.

"I can't shake, Marsh." He displayed his hands. "We're butchering."

On the shady side of the barn Savvy's father was overseeing the skinning and cleaning of a yearling that had been shot and hauled up on a pulley. Two of Savvy's younger brothers were helping. Don Alberto greeted Marsh cordially, and Marsh said hello to Eulenterio and Ramón, the boys.

"Come out to see the new house?" asked Savvy.

"That," said Marsh, "and to see if I could interest you in taking your dogs on a mountain lion hunt. Doesn't look as if I'm good enough with the traps to get him — at least get him very soon. Meantime he's killing deer."

Savvy looked at his father. Don Alberto smiled. "Marsh is the good friend, Severiano, and *el león* is the bad enemy. Go if you wish."

After a moment, Savvy said: " Then count me in, Marsh. Why not start Monday? Better take a camp outfit and stay out till we get him, hadn't we? "

Marsh thought the idea good.

" Let's take a look at the new house," Savvy suggested, and Marsh walked with him across the creek to a well-built frame cottage set in another grove of trees.

Marsh ventured, surveying the corner windows and Venetian blinds, " Not what they call Spanish-style architecture."

Savvy chuckled. " We'll have antiseptic in the medicine cabinet, also, instead of sky-blue sills to keep out the devils. Grandpa wouldn't see that, either."

Marsh and Savvy were loaded and ready to go Monday before the morning crisp was out of the air. The back of the jeep was piled with duffel for camping. On this pile sat four lop-eared, crossbred dogs that Savvy said were his best.

" I'd supposed hunting dogs would be bigger," Marsh said a little doubtfully, eying a liver-colored mutt perched on the rolled tent.

" It's a question of nose," Savvy told him, " and spirit. All they do is tree the cat so we can get a shot."

The jeep had a heavy job, with all their equipment plus the trailer with Oatbin and Savvy's big sorrel, El Capitán. When they came to a place where the trailer's height and bulk would no longer clear the trees, they left it. Marsh drove on as far as he could with the dogs and equipment, while Savvy followed with the horses, riding El Capitán and leading Oatbin. Marsh had set up the beginnings of a camp by the time his companion arrived.

The boys cached their outfit in order to get on the trail quickly. Marsh led the way to the first lion set he had

made. He found a coyote in one of the traps.

" Heck," he said. " There was no need for taking this coyote way up here. Wish I knew some way of keeping them out of the lion traps."

" They probably stay clear as long as the lion scent lasts," Savvy suggested.

" I suppose," Marsh agreed. He looked at Savvy thoughtfully. " I remember now. I forgot something."

He reset all the traps, this time propping up the trigger with a stout twig placed beneath it.

" What's the point? " asked Savvy.

" Government trapping procedure," Marsh explained. " Small animals can step on it without danger, but a lion, weighing a hundred and fifty pounds or more, will snap the twig and spring the trap."

" Smart operation," said Savvy. " Put me on a lion track, will you, before these dogs have a fit? "

The dogs had been whining and growling, and only Savvy's sharp orders had kept them from dashing off. Marsh led the way along the ridge to the sandy saddle where he had found tracks.

Savvy got down and snapped his fingers above the tracks. The dogs came, sniffed furiously, and set up an excited chorus of whines and yelps.

" Vámonos, amigos," said Savvy, and leaped for his saddle. " Keep 'em in sight if you can," he shouted to Marsh. " At least don't let 'em out of hearing."

The dogs made a quick circle of the area and then dashed away along the ridge, the two boys spurring recklessly in their wake. The liver-colored hound led the way, keeping up a continuous " A-ROO, a-ROO, a-ROO! " that was half bark and half howl.

Suddenly Marsh yelled, " They're going right back to

that station we came from! "

Savvy spurred ahead on El Capitán and, by dint of much shouting and snapping of his saddle quirt, kept the dogs from dashing into the traps. He grinned at Marsh ruefully.

" Forgot to pick our direction," he said. " But at least the dogs have got the idea. They like lion flavor even better than bobcat. Let's see if we can find which way the lion went from here."

They cut a circle around the clearing, and at last found a spot where El Rojo, the lead dog, insisted he wanted to take off down the canyon. They decided to follow.

At the creek, Marsh shouted, " Can you hold 'em a minute so I can look for tracks to make sure? "

Savvy called the dogs back, and in a few minutes Marsh located prints in soft earth near the stream. " It went through here," he announced, " in the direction we're going. At a walk."

They sent the dogs on again and followed. The eagerness of the dogs made tough work for the horses, going through the trailless wilderness at high speed. Time and again the boys had to call back the dogs and let the horses blow.

They stopped at noon and ate lunch from their saddlebags, while the animals rested. Then they were at it again, mile after mile, all either up or down. Occasionally the dogs lost the trail at a rocky, unclimbable point, but the boys learned to lead them in a circle until sharp noses found the scent again. The boys came to welcome these delays as opportunities to rest.

It was late in the day when they came at last to the gigantic rocky upthrusts that could be seen for miles. Marsh

estimated that they were several miles beyond the borders of Chiricahua County.

There in the rocks the dogs lost the trail. The tumbled heaps of barren granite held scent but lightly at best, and there was no heavy soil or thick brush on the other side where the trail could be picked up again. Marsh got the impression that there *was* no other side to these towering, tumbled slopes.

" Well," he said, " it looks as if we know what block he lives in, but we can't locate the house number."

Savvy looked at the dogs, flopped panting in the shade; at the horses, standing, hip-shot with weariness; and back to the inaccessible jumble of boulders. " No getting a horse or dog up in there. I'd hate to tackle it on foot. It'll be dark before we get back to camp too."

" Maybe tomorrow we'll catch him away from home, Savvy."

The miles back to camp seemed much, much longer. The dogs padded disconsolately at the horses' heels, and saddle weariness crept into Marsh's bones. But finally they reached their outfit, got their camp fully set up, and ate a canned meal. After that Savvy began building up the fire.

" Hey," said Marsh, " we'll be here only a few days."

Savvy laughed. " You never know," he retorted, " or should I say, *' ¿Quién sabe? '* " He brought a heavy iron pot with a lid from his own duffel and half filled it with water. Into this he cut pieces of meat and peeled vegetables, including two sliced red peppers. " Advance preparations, Mexican style," he said.

By this time the fire had burned low, and he set the pot on the heated rocks of the fireplace. " This will cook all night," Savvy explained, " and tomorrow we'll hang it

from a tree branch and have supper ready to heat and serve when we get in."

" Now that's pretty slick," Marsh admired.

They lay back, heads on their saddles, feet toward the glowing fire. Down by the creek the picketed horses grazed steadily. The dogs drowsed on the matted old needles under the big pines.

Far off the air was shattered by a shrill, " Yip-yip-yip," mounting higher into a long-drawn falsetto, " OO-oo-oo-oo." Coyotes' howling became a dreamy cadenced melody at this distance. Another voice joined the first, and quickly a whole chorus seemed to be at it. The dogs whimpered uneasily and moved over to nudge against Savvy.

" *Es nada, mis hermanitos,*" Savvy comforted them. " Do you know why the coyote cries, Marsh? "

Marsh pondered. " Didn't he learn it from Pecos Bill, his foster brother, who was mourning the loss of his girl friend? "

" Ah, no," said Severiano Diaz. " You are earth-bound, *amigo.* In the early days of creation, Don Coyote gained audience with the Father God and requested the privilege of eating men.

" ' *'Sta bueno,*' agreed the Father, ' if first you will prove your self-control by fasting until noon of the day after tomorrow.'

" ' *Bueno,*' said Don Coyote, and went away to sleep under a mesquite tree so that he would not get hungry. For he was very anxious to be allowed to prey on men, who are slow of foot and poorly equipped to fight, besides being well supplied with fat, especially in middle age."

Marsh rolled over and sat up, to listen better. The soft

inimitable lilt of the Spanish voice, the dying fire, the faint, far song of the coyotes, wove their spell about him.

" Then Father God, to protect his children," went on Savvy, " called *el tecolote,* the owl, who is the only creature that can match wits with Don Coyote.

" ' *Tecolote,*' said he, ' I have reason to doubt *el coyote*'s self-control. He has promised to fast until day after tomorrow noon, but I wish that you will put him to the test, whether he will resist temptation.'

" *El tecolote* went and found Don Coyote asleep under the mesquite, and offered to keep him company during his trial. Don Coyote was glad. For a night and a day and a night the owl visited with the coyote, speaking again and again of all manner of good things to eat. But while the coyote slavered at the jowls with hunger, and thrashed the ground with his tail, he remained steadfast to his vow, thinking what fine meals would be his when he could kill men.

" On the last morning, the owl said, ' Let us go for a walk, the more quickly to pass time,' and Don Coyote agreed. They set out through the forest, the owl gathering resin from the pine trees as he passed, for the owl had a plan.

" At the other side of the forest they came to *una taberna,* and the coyote wished to run away quickly, for the odor of food drove him mad. ' No,' said the owl, ' let us have a glass of *tequila.* That will sustain you, and it is not food, but drink.'

" Coyote said, ' I dare not, for Father God is strict, and anything sustaining he may consider a breaking of the fast.'

" ' I tell you,' said owl. ' Father God need never know, for I can clean your teeth afterward so no hint remains.'

" The coyote allowed himself to be persuaded, for he was even hungrier than coyotes usually are. They ordered *tequila* from *el tabernero* and drank it quickly. Then owl began to clean coyote's teeth. For this purpose he used the resin he had gathered, and which he had dipped in his own *tequila* before he drank.

" ' It is near noon,' cried Don Coyote. ' I must go quickly.'

" When he came to his appointment, the Father asked, ' Have you kept your fast and taken nothing since I saw you? '

" ' Oh, *sí, sí, Señor,*' declared Don Coyote.

" ' Open your mouth,' commanded the Father.

" Don Coyote opened his mouth, and there among his teeth were stuck bits of pine gum smelling heavily of *tequila.*

" ' You have lied to me! ' thundered Father God. ' You shall evermore eat nothing but small, weak creatures: the jack rabbit and the chipmunk, the chicken and the duck, the suckling pig and the goat's kid, and the cricket and the grasshopper. But you shall never, never attack a human, though it be but an hour old! '

" The coyote turned and ran away crying, and every night since he has cried again for the privilege he lost so long ago."

Marsh drew a long breath as the sound of Savvy's voice fell away. He had a sense of having been an incredible distance away, unnumbered years ago, and a stick cracking in the fire caused him to start violently.

" Boy, Savvy," he breathed, " if ever you give up punching cattle, you ought to be a professional storyteller! You've got the knack."

They slept soundly that night in their bedrolls spread

on spruce boughs under the tent. Before it was light they cooked their breakfast, filled their canvas water bags, and, with a can of beans and a can of tomatoes each in their saddlebags for lunch, set out to find the lion " away from home."

That day they went straight to the cliff country and prowled along the base of the great rock slides, looking for a place where the lion had gone out to hunt. It was early enough yet so that they could hope it had not returned.

Almost at once El Rojo gave out his war whoop.

" Hold him," called Marsh. " Let's try to make sure we get a fresh trail."

He found prints on the earth, but they were fuzzy-edged, obviously old. They continued the search.

It was late morning when they came on a small spring at the base of the cliff, and in the soft ground a wealth of lion sign that sent the dogs into an immediate frenzy. Marsh, examining, saw one set of prints with water still seeping into them. The prints led away from the cliff.

" Here we go! " he shouted, and they pounded away.

They followed the dogs eagerly, but their excitement began to wear with the hours and miles. The dogs also began to tire. Where they had been able to hold the course only because of the dogs' constant baying, Marsh and Savvy eventually brought them in sight again. They stopped for lunch.

" If Mr. Ringland's right that this is the quickest way to get a lion," Marsh said wryly, " I'd hate to try the slowest."

" I've heard it said that mountain lions will never be extinct," Savvy nodded, setting his can of beans in the fire to heat. " I can see why."

They spent the afternoon riding through magnificent scenery without enough energy left to enjoy it. The dogs kept up a hopeful baying, however, and the boys kept thinking that perhaps just around the next hill . . .

Just around a hill, at last, they came to trail's end. A sheer pitch of smooth rock shot up from the canyon's floor, and at the base the dogs were leaping futilely.

Marsh dismounted and they explored, but the dogs were unwilling to go on.

" The lion must have gone up that sheet of rock," Savvy said at last. " He's not far ahead of us. Come to think of it, the dogs did sound pretty excited the last mile or so."

Marsh's voice was incredulous as he stared up those hundreds of feet of glassy surface. " He couldn't have. A lizard would slip and break his neck on that."

" There's a flaw here," Savvy pointed out. " I can see how he might make it for a hundred yards or so, up to that spot where the two scrub trees are growing. But after that it overhangs."

" Cryin' out loud! " exclaimed Marsh. " Then he's still up there, Savvy."

Savvy stared up at the tree. " Now how do we get him down? "

" It's easy rifle range," said Marsh, and pulled his weapon from the saddle boot. He raised it to his shoulder and immediately lowered it again. " Hey, it's getting dark. I hadn't noticed."

" We'll have to wait till morning."

" But he may be gone by then."

" Then we'd better stay here," said Savvy, " and keep a fire going all night. That will keep him up there until daylight."

" Fine," groaned Marsh. " No blankets, no food for us or the dogs, and not much water. Still, I guess we ought to."

" It's not so far to the creek but that we could camp there and come up during the night to keep the fire going."

The prospect was at least better than facing another indefinite stretch of trailing to catch the lion away from his home cliffs. They set about building a fire. With it going well, they picked their way through the thick dusk to the creek, a quarter of a mile away. It was a small and nameless trickle, but it was water. They built another fire there for warmth during the night, unsaddled the horses, and settled down to wait for dawn.

" I'll bet you're thinking why did I ever leave Tecolote Crick," Marsh grinned at Savvy.

Savvy sighed. " I was thinking of that kettle of stew and wondering why we didn't think to put more cans of beans and tomatoes in our saddlebags. As Don Coyote would say, ' We should consider the consequences of what we plan to do before we do it.' "

" Is there a story to that? " asked Marsh. " I can't think of a better way to pass what's going to be a long night."

" There are hundreds of tales about Don Coyote," Savvy told him, " a lot of them better than that tooth paste commercial I was telling you last night. Anyway, one time Don Coyote was traveling across a desert. He got very thirsty. At last, his nose led him to a well someone had dug. He could see cool, clear water at the bottom, but it was too far down to reach, and the sides of the well were straight, so that if he jumped in he would not be able to get out again, though the water was not deep enough to drown him.

" While Don Coyote stood there longing, a goat came up to the well and stood beside him. The goat too had been traveling across the desert, and was thirsty. So thirsty that he forgot his fear of Don Coyote in his need.

" Don Coyote was so thirsty by this time that he had forgotten hunger also, but he had not forgotten his shrewdness.

" ' Brother Goat,' he said, ' better it is to die standing in cool, sweet water than burning upon this fiery desert. Let us jump into the well and satisfy our thirst, and then perhaps God will show us a way to get out.'

" ' True,' said Señor Goat, ' I can no longer endure the torture of this thirst. I will jump into the well, whatever the result.'

" So both animals jumped into the well. Don Coyote lapped and lapped at the delicious water, and the goat drank and drank for a long time before he raised his dripping beard.

" ' I am refreshed,' cried Brother Coyote. ' I have an idea for getting us out.'

" ' You have a very fine brain, Brother,' the goat complimented him. ' What is your idea? '

" ' If you will place your forefeet as high as possible on the wall,' said Don Coyote, ' I can climb upon your shoulders. Then I can place my feet upon your forehead, which is very strong and will not be hurt, and I can jump out. Then I can pull you up.'

" ' You do have much smartness, Brother Coyote,' bleated the goat, and quickly did as he was directed.

" Señor Coyote was soon out of the well, whereupon he looked over his shoulder and smiled at Señor Goat.

" ' *Hasta luego, amigo,*' he said.

" ' Wait! ' the goat bleated. ' You cannot do this. You

have tricked me! '

" ' You have tricked yourself, Brother Goat,' Coyote called back as he departed. ' If your brain were as sharp as your beard, you would have considered how you were going to get out of the well, as I did, before you jumped in.' "

Marsh chuckled. " That Señor Coyote is quite a character, isn't he? Say, Savvy, why doesn't one of us stay here to keep the fire going, and the other ride over to camp and bring back some supplies? "

" Leave it to a gringo," laughed Savvy, " to make a practical application. That's a good idea. I'll stay here, so the dogs won't want to follow, and you go."

It was a long and exhausting trip in the dark, and the moon, being new, didn't help much. Marsh didn't get back until midnight, but neither boy could remember food ever tasting so good.

" I'm going to go to sleep, I'm so full," Marsh said after a few minutes. " Better keep talking, Savvy."

Savvy said: " No, you go ahead and sleep awhile. Then I'll wake you, and you can watch while I sleep."

Marsh was sure he had scarcely stretched out before Savvy shook him awake, but his watch showed four o'clock. He made a trip up to the fire at the base of the sheet rock, which roused him somewhat. When he returned, Savvy was sleeping heavily.

Marsh built up their own fire and sat down under a tree. Every muscle in his body was heavy with fatigue.

He came to himself with the sun full in his eyes, and leaped to his feet with an angry exclamation. Savvy rolled over and opened his eyes.

" What's the matter? " he asked sleepily.

" I dozed off," Marsh called, and started up the hill at

a run. The wood fire had died away. He was berating himself when Savvy arrived a few seconds later.

" Now I suppose the lion's got away," Marsh lamented.

" It may be as well," said Savvy. " I'd not figured out how to get him down from up there if he'd stayed. Let's circle for sign. You look for tracks and I'll take the dogs."

They found the trail at the same moment, Marsh locating prints in a sandy wash just as the dogs set up their eager racket.

The boys saddled hurriedly and took up once more the endless riding after the baying hounds.

But there was a new note in the dogs' voices this morning, and neither El Capitán nor Oatbin could keep them in sight. The chase climbed to a saddle and passed into another canyon. Far ahead the dogs heightened their clamor to a pitch of frenzy.

" There he goes! " shouted Marsh.

For a fleeting instant they had a glimpse of a tawny form bounding up the opposite slope in prodigious leaps. They put spurs to the horses, all thought of care brushed aside, and tore down the slope at a breakneck pace. The dogs flashed across the clearing the lion had just left, and a moment later they heard the canine voices break into an uproar of triumph.

" They've got him treed," cried Savvy, and pulled El Capitán to a walk. " No hurry now."

What followed was almost a letdown. They rode carefully up the slope, and near the top came upon the dogs leaping furiously about the base of a big jack pine. Twenty feet up, the great cat crouched on a thick limb, snarling and spitting whenever one of the dogs leaped extra high. He paid no attention to the two riders.

Marsh pulled his rifle from the boot.

" Get down and take careful aim," Savvy warned. " If he hits the ground alive, we'll lose some dogs."

Marsh zeroed the cross hairs of his telescope sight on the animal's glaring eye and squeezed trigger. The cat sprang straight out into the air, and came down turning over and over, to land with a terrific crash. Savvy leaped in with his own rifle, but a second was not needed. The lion was dead.

The dogs plunged viciously upon the killer.

" Rojo! " Marsh shouted. " *Vaya,* Rojo! Call 'em off, Savvy. I don't want to get that skin torn."

Savvy had some difficulty persuading the dogs not to tear the animal's fur, but the pelt was undamaged.

" Now to get him home," Savvy said. " El Capitán's accustomed to carrying dead bobcats, so he'll probably take to the idea more kindly than Oatbin."

Their combined strength was necessary to get the two hundred pounds of marauder loaded behind El Capitán's saddle and lashed in place, but the horse created little disturbance at the scent.

Late in the afternoon they pulled into Chiricahua, driving slowly out of weariness, the big cat lashed across the hood of the jeep. Two small boys saw them at the edge of town, gawked, and ran ahead shouting. Ed Linck came out of the garage and gave a long whistle of amazement. By the time the boys parked in the center of the street before the *Tribune* office, they were in the middle of a triumphal procession.

Mr. Temple and Marlou came running out, but the man stopped short and went back for a camera.

" Yea, hey! " cried Marlou. " How does it feel to be a conquering hero? And you're speaking for publication."

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh rubbed his three days' growth of beard and groaned.

" Marsh, this is wonderful! Just wait till Daddy sees." That was Diane Ringland, approaching from the hardware store where she was clerking for the summer. " Dad! Dad! Come quickly! "

" Want to hold the nice kitty for a picture, Diane? " asked Mr. Temple, setting up the tripod for his camera.

" Oh, may I? " She climbed swiftly to the jeep's hood and gingerly lifted up the awesome head.

" Get a shot of Marsh and his rifle," suggested Mr. Ringland as he joined the crowd. " A nice job, Marsh."

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh repeated, dazed but joyous. " Don't miss Savvy and the dogs, Dad. I'd never have caught up with this lion if it hadn't been for them."

" Soon as you skin him out," the ranger continued, " we'll go over to the county clerk's office and I'll sign

the affidavit with you so we can send it along with the pelt to Denver for the bounty from the State Game and Fish Commission."

Marsh said: " Hey, wait a minute. I can't take a bounty, being a Government hunter. Listen, by rights this is Savvy's trophy. I couldn't take this booger myself, and all I contributed was one cartridge. Make this Savvy's play, with an assist from me."

" Marsh shot it," said Savvy.

" No, but that's right," Marsh insisted. " Savvy's got the money coming to him. The skin too, which he couldn't get if I call it my doings."

" Why don't the two of you decide how to divide it and let me know. We can fix it any way."

Marsh nodded agreement, and looked at Diane. " I could come up to your house this evening and tell you what we work out."

Diane blushed. They agreed on a time, and then she seemed to remember very suddenly that the Chiricahua Hardware had urgent need of her services.

Mr. Temple finished his pictures. The boys took the lion to Marsh's house to be skinned later, and unloaded Marsh's duffel. Then Marsh took Savvy home.

" Look, Marsh," Savvy said, " I'd like to have that skin. Maybe have it made up into something for the new house. You take the money and let me have the pelt."

" No can do," Marsh said regretfully. " Service rules don't allow it. I'd like you to have both anyway, Savvy."

" That's entirely unfair," Savvy protested. " I'll take them both, but I'm going to make you a present of the hide."

" If that's the only way you'll have it," Marsh agreed. " Man, that was really a hunt, wasn't it? I wouldn't have

missed it for a farm in Texas."

" I won't have so much fun again till the Fourth of July rodeo," said Savvy. " You entering? Maybe you could take the bronc-busting money away from me."

" Don't kid me," said Marsh. " On a bucking horse I couldn't take a prize from your baby sister. The only rodeo sport I was ever any good at was bulldogging. I got so I could wrastle a steer down once in a while last summer while I was working for Goodhues."

" Then come on and enter the bulldogging. You've got the shoulders for it, and anyway it's not professional competition, only local guys out for the fun."

Marsh considered a moment. " O.K., fella. See you at the rodeo."

He was in a mood to agree to almost anything. Remembering expansively that reception in town awhile ago, he could consider the whole world and find it good. As for a life's work, as Savvy would say, *¿Quién sabe?* Right now he was living a trapper's life, so why not live it to the full and stop asking himself unanswerable questions about the long tomorrows?

8

IN THE mail that had accumulated while Marsh had been away was a note from Mr. Killion. The supervisor would soon be in Chiricahua.

Next day it rained, and Marsh was grateful for time to put his equipment and his reports in order. Back in his mind was the idea that he ought to put his thoughts in order, as well. Mr. Killion would be sizing up his fitness as a hunter. But he was still in that mood where it was easier not to think too much about the still uncertain future.

The district supervisor arrived in the Government pickup before eight o'clock on a clear morning. They got into the jeep, with Oatbin riding in the trailer, and headed for Middlesworths'.

" I planned this trip," Mr. Killion said with a sidelong look, " to give you some pointers on mountain lion technique."

Marsh knew an uneasy moment, and then felt his chest expand. The supervisor was joking; he had received the report that the lion was taken. " I hope it was all right to say this Severiano Diaz took it, with my help? "

" It's your record," Mr. Killion agreed, " and you know

the circumstances. As a matter of public relations, it's quite possible that lion will do much good going to Diaz. Speaking of public relations, I'm in a receipt of a letter from this goat rancher Rapelli, which makes a nice entry in your folder too."

Marsh flushed with pleasure.

" How does the Gus Garver situation stand? " Mr. Killion inquired.

Marsh turned into the Mill Creek road. " Nothing more's happened. I think Gus must have learned his lesson."

Mr. Killion shook his head. " I can't be so optimistic. The danger is that you'll be inclined to put the whole thing out of your mind. I take it Gus has no constructive outlet for his energies. Probably nothing but plenty of time to brood over his grievances and plot revenge."

Marsh thought back to the day his father had remarked that while Gus was reaching a man's age and size, nobody had bothered to help him find a man's place in life. Finally he asked, " You mean you think I should arrest Gus still, and press my case against him? "

" I think you don't have any case against him, in the legal sense. What I'm getting at is that instead of all now being sweetness and light, the battle may be only beginning."

Marsh pondered. " I don't get that."

" You've made some friends — Middlesworth, Rapelli, Ringland. As Woody tells it, you face complete opposition from Garver, a rancher named Ledington, and a fur buyer named — was it Hagen? "

" Wagner," said Marsh. " That's true."

" So you have two opposing camps lined up ready for war."

" Cryin' out loud! I figured all I had to do was to go on trapping predatory animals."

" The better you do that, the more support you'll get from the majority of ranchers," agreed Mr. Killion. " Today I want to go over your lines with you carefully."

At the ranch Marsh said, " Mr. Middlesworth, would you lend me a horse for Mr. Killion today, so he can look over my sets? "

" Sure thing," the rancher answered.

As he rode away with Mr. Killion, Marsh said, " You haven't mentioned the Goodhues — big cattle ranchers who are on my side."

" Be glad for every bit of support you get," Mr. Killion said. " You'll need it."

As the day progressed, Marsh was amazed at the extent of the supervisor's knowledge.

" I can't figure why this gitter doesn't take anything," he said, as they came to where a cow path crossed a dry wash. " That stick of driftwood is certainly a trading post."

" From which way would a coyote approach it? " Mr. Killion asked.

" Down the hill from the northeast, I suppose."

" So he passes the gitter while his mind is on finding the trading post. Try it on the other side, where he won't be preoccupied with more urgent business."

Marsh dug up the gitter.

" Won't work there, either," Mr. Killion told him, as he moved to a new location. " After sundown, it's warmer in the valley than on the hill, so the wind will be blowing down the draw. Set it uphill from the trail, and not in the wash. On the bank, where more breeze will strike it to carry the scent."

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh said, chastened. " What I can't get over is how there's always more to be learned about this kind of work."

" Just now," said Mr. Killion, " I'm taking an extension course in agricultural economics and writing my term paper on wildlife management as a factor in the livestock industry. You never find trapping an insult to your intelligence, Marsh, if you want to keep going."

Soon after lunch they rode onto the stretch of land where the she-coyote had tried to lead Marsh away from her den.

" No sets along here," he said. " I found out it's state land so I can't get permission, and — "

" Send a letter to the State Land Board in Denver."

" No use working this, anyway. The Ledington place is right over there, and he raises coyotes faster'n I could hope to take 'em." He recounted the incident of the she-coyote.

Mr. Killion said sharply: " Don't you ever again enter a man's property without permission. You violated a basic policy of the Service. You never enter without permission. An invitation such as you had from Middlesworth or Rapelli is even better, but in any event you work only with the rancher's co-operation."

" I've never had a chance to work with John Ledington," Marsh said, trying not to show his sudden anger. " He's worked against me ever since his dog got killed, and from the first he's said we're trying to wipe the coyote from the face of the earth."

" We're not. Has that been explained to him? "

" Try to explain anything to that guy," growled Marsh. " He gets to making like an orator and you don't stand a chance."

" I'd like to meet the man. How far is it to his place? "

" Not over two miles straight across. Maybe three around by the road."

" We'll take the road," decided Mr. Killion, " since we're not invited."

They found the Ledington family in a field of mountain lettuce that occupied a slope between the creek and the ranch house. John Junior was operating a one-horse cultivator and the others were hoeing. As Marsh and Mr. Killion approached, they were announced by the short, sharp barking of Fritz. Marsh introduced his supervisor and stood back.

" Good watchdog you have," Mr. Killion praised.

" He's a regular member of the family," Mr. Ledington stated, " and a useful citizen besides. Trained to drive cattle."

John Junior roughed up the dog's black fur. " Shake hands, Fritz."

Fritz, sitting at a well-disciplined distance from the strangers, now came forward, sat down again, and gravely raised his paw to Mr. Killion. Mr. Killion squatted and returned the greeting.

" Good dog," he said approvingly. He held his hand extended, palm down, for the dog to sniff. " Coyote lure," he explained solemnly, as if Fritz could understand. " You want to stay away from it."

A stiff silence fell over the Ledingtons, and Marsh felt definitely uncomfortable.

At last Louise said, " We've got another pet, a coyote pup."

" He's mine," declared John Junior. " I think he's about two months old."

" I hope you'll turn him loose in the fall," said Mr.

Killion. " I never like to see wild animals confined, especially after they're grown. The young don't seem to mind so much, if they're well treated."

" In your line of work," Mr. Ledington said, " I'd have supposed you'd want it killed."

" No," Mr. Killion returned, speaking to John Junior. " Just teach it to eat rabbits and gophers, Son, so it won't become a menace to livestock."

" Those guns Marsh puts around make no distinction," Mr. Ledington said sharply.

" Except that he sets only the areas where any predator is a potential menace to livestock. The coyote is not in any immediate danger of extinction, though. It's found in forty-six of the forty-eight states."

" But extinction is the final purpose. You — "

" No. Hog-raising in some parts of Arkansas was once in danger of extinction, until coyotes were brought under control. It was a case of thin them out for the protection of civilized society or let the land go back to the Indians, as the expression goes."

" The Indians made good use of the land," said Mr. Ledington.

" How so? "

" They didn't despoil it. They never took a life without asking forgiveness."

" Except human life," amended Mr. Killion. " I guess that's the crux of the matter, isn't it? Whether resources should be put to human use or left to nature, unused. Leaving out of consideration the ignorant who want only to exploit."

" You're talking conservation," exclaimed Mr. Ledington. " You can't call your program conservation! "

" I call it control," said Mr. Killion. " Like damming

a stream for power and irrigation. You don't destroy the stream; you use it. I notice you're contour cultivating this land. You're not ruining it; you're putting it to its best use." He looked at his watch. " Marsh, we'll have to be going."

After they had mounted and ridden out of earshot, Marsh said, " He's still not convinced."

Mr. Killion was thoughtful. " He's a very unusual man. I'd like to see him on our side. I tried to leave him room to come round gracefully if he changes his mind. Better just let him alone for a while."

That Marsh could consent to do with a whole heart.

It was dinnertime when they rode into Chiricahua, but Mr. Killion had to move on. He climbed into the pickup.

" Keep up the good work, Marsh. Good trapping is the best way to win support. We almost never meet this much opposition, but if you keep your eyes open for chances to help people out, you'll be doing about all you can do."

Marsh turned toward home feeling on the whole pretty well pleased with himself.

" Mr. Killion give you some good pointers? " Dad asked.

" He really did," Marsh declared. " He also called on John Ledington. There's a tough nut to crack."

" Let's say he's a man of strong convictions," suggested Mom. " Mr. Killion seems very nice."

Marsh spoke in instant agreement. " You can say that again. I was relieved he didn't raise any objection to my giving Savvy credit for the lion."

" I have an idea! " Marlou exclaimed. " No cracks, Marsh. But wouldn't it be something to have that skin made into a rug and give it to Savvy and Rosa for a wedding present? "

" Oh, grand! " cried Mrs. Temple.

" Hey, that's all right," said Marsh, beaming. " Savvy spoke about having it in the new house. But I don't know how much it'd cost."

" Make it a family gift," Mr. Temple offered, " and I'll help with the financing."

" I'm so excited." Marlou's eyes were shining.

" Listen," said Marsh. " Let's get Ivan Wagner to have it made up for us. He was telling me one time about getting furs made from raw pelts. That'll give me a chance to get back on the good side of him again, and maybe he'll even come around in time to running his ad in the paper again. How's that for wrapping the whole deal up in tissue paper and tying it with a blue ribbon? "

" A lot of maybe's and again's," said Marlou, " but it would do no harm to try." She looked at her father.

Mr. Temple nodded.

Marlou went on, " If you get in before closing time tomorrow, we'll go over to talk with Mr. Wagner about it."

Marsh managed to be at home by five thirty the following day. He walked with his twin to the Wagner Wool and Hide.

As Marsh reached for the office doorknob, he saw Gus Garver through the glass, evidently starting to leave in a hurry. Wagner apparently said something and Gus returned to the chair he had evidently been occupying.

" We can't just stand here," muttered Marlou, and Marsh walked in.

" Hello," said Ivan Wagner without rising. His fingers tapped the desk in front of him.

The twins said, " Hello," and Marsh added, " Hi, Gus."

" Ah," Gus rumbled, " the local big shots. You get

called on by important people right along, Wagner?" Gus stood up.

"You don't need to hurry, Gus," said Ivan Wagner, without taking his eyes from Marsh and Marlou. "I'll get word to you if I can use anybody to work in the warehouse."

"Yeah; yeah, you do that." Gus left through the rear door, the frayed edges of his buckskin smock swaying with the roll of his Indian stride, but failing to cover entirely a crude patch on the seat of his faded jeans.

"Mr. Wagner," said Marlou, "Marsh says you know somebody in Denver who makes up animal skins."

The man's lips appeared to thin. "I don't remember saying exactly that, but what about it?"

Marsh heard a sound outside, and through the window saw Gus Garver ride from behind the building on his pinto and turn up the street away from town.

"Savvy Diaz is going to give that lion skin to Marsh," Marlou explained, "and we'd like to have it made into a rug for a wedding present to Savvy and Rosa. Could you have that done for us?"

Ivan Wagner seemed to thaw visibly, and Marsh mentally commended himself on his idea.

"Let's see. When are Rosa and Savvy getting married?"

"The twentieth of July."

"Plenty of time. Two or three weeks should be enough. Did you bring the pelt along?"

"It hasn't come back from the State Game and Fish yet," Marsh told him.

"Well, get it to me and we'll rush it through."

"How much will it cost?"

"The big outfits would charge plenty," Mr. Wagner

said, " but with these people I know, I can save you some money and get you a quality of fur craftsmanship that's almost forgotten these days."

Marsh and Marlou walked down the street thoughtfully.

Marsh said: " I don't get it why Gus was there and didn't want it known. He tried to sneak away."

" Naturally he wasn't anxious to meet us," his twin offered.

" I mean why'd he have his horse tied behind the building? And what was he doing there this time of day, anyway? And since when has he been looking for work? "

" That sounded phony to me too," admitted Marlou.

" Guess I've got a low, suspicious mind," Marsh went on, " but I've had the idea before that Ivan Wagner and John Ledington might be encouraging Gus to spoil my hunting."

" O Marsh," she protested, " that seems like going too far. I think you must be suffering from jumpy nerves."

" Could be. Besides, Gus has quit bothering me, so I don't know what I'm kicking about. I'm fully occupied without cooking up a mystery for myself."

He was very fully occupied, he reflected two hours later as he turned from the telephone after having received a call.

" Now there's something for you," he told the family. " Lazy Time Dude Ranch says coyotes are running their dogs."

" Wait a minute," said Mr. Temple. " I've heard of dogs chasing coyotes, but — Sure you had a good connection on that rural party line? "

" That's the way Mr. Sloan told it. They have those big collies too, but he swears a pack of coyotes have been

chasing them home from the woods, and one dog got all slashed up today. Well, I'll go out and make some sets tomorrow."

"It's nearly thirty miles out there," protested his mother, "and it's clear away from your regular work."

Marsh laughed. "Whole Basin's my territory, Mom, and there's lots of people in it that haven't yet called on me. I want to make myself useful to as many as possible."

By half past ten the next morning he was planting gitters along a slope high on the rugged shoulder of Cresta Blanca. Far below him the dude ranch buildings were tiny, tidy blocks of color in a picturesque bowl.

At noon, as he lay taking it easy under a big pine, a horseback party left the ranch and started up a bridle trail that led into the mountains off to his left. He might meet them before the day was over, he thought. Presently they were out of sight, and he forgot about them as he worked.

When he came to the bridle path, however, there ahead and below him were some of the party — two girls and three youths, his own age or a bit older. They had dismounted, tied their horses, and were gathered in an intent cluster beside the trail. Their mounts were snorting and tugging at the reins.

Marsh rode forward curiously. Oatbin began to fidget and dance, and not for some seconds did Marsh make out what went on. Then his blood froze. The dudes had cornered a very young bear cub. One of the girls was, with some difficulty, petting the indignant black ball of fur. The others were making appropriate sounds of delight as the cub bared its baby teeth and emitted its infant growl.

Marsh gave Oatbin the spurs. The palomino lunged

into a run and slid to a halt in a cloud of dust beside the astounded tourists.

" Cryin' out loud! " Marsh jerked in an urgent undertone. " Get out of here quick." He held Oatbin steady with difficulty.

The tourists looked up at him, startled, confused, and a little angry. One of them began, " What — "; and another, " Who — "

" Don't talk," Marsh begged. " If that mother bear should show up — Get your horses, please." He snatched loose the reins of the most nervous horse and held it snubbed against Oatbin's left side for its rider to mount. The feat took all his strength and riding skill.

The young people climbed to their saddles uncertainly, a little babble of indignant voices rising in the clearing.

" Hang on," Marsh warned. Sure enough, the tourist horses fairly bolted away. Marsh snatched his rifle from its boot and watched their back trail as he rode. The cub, thank heaven, ran in the opposite direction.

Within a minute the slow-paced and docile dude ponies had winded themselves and slowed to a halt on the little rise from which Marsh had first seen the party. Now he flipped his reins over to ground-hitch Oatbin, slid from the saddle, and went down on one knee beside the trail. He steadied his rifle across a rock.

" What on earth are you trying to do? " one of the boys demanded. " And who are you, anyway? "

" I'm the Government hunter in this area," Marsh snapped, without taking his eyes from the bear cub, " and I was saving your skins." Anger began to crowd out his own alarm.

" Ah-h! " It was the voice of the girl. The cub had sat

down in the dust and was wailing loudly, his chubby paws over his eyes. " B'ess his 'ittle heart! "

" We weren't hurting — " began the indignant youth, but his words trailed away.

The mother bear burst out of the trees by the creek at astounding speed. She dashed past the cub with a quick

bob of her head, circled, and came to a stop. She rose to her hind legs, five hundred pounds of awesome fury, and peered shortsightedly in every direction.

Marsh, still angry, asked tartly, " You want to go back down there and explain you meant no harm? "

The cub let out another wail, and the mother bear swung over to her offspring with that deceptively rapid shamble. She paused to sniff, and the sound of her wrath brought a collective gasp from the group behind Marsh. He heard the horses dancing uneasily.

The she-bear's front paw moved in a blurred flash.

Smack! The cub went rolling from a blow on his rear. He scrambled and cried, but his mother was on him. She seized him in both paws and flopped him in the dust. She rolled him over. She scrubbed him up and down in the dirt. She set him on his feet again and whacked him twice in lightning succession as he jumped.

" Oh, the poor thing! " one of the girls half sobbed.

" He's built to take it," Marsh said, beginning to feel a bit sorry for her. " That's not a patching to what she'd have done to us."

They watched the she-bear swat her offending offspring again. He tumbled down the slope toward the creek. His mother was right behind him.

" Why don't you shoot? " demanded the youth.

" She's doing no harm," Marsh answered. " Besides, it's against the law, unless she attacks us or starts killing livestock."

The outraged bear paddled her cub all the way to the creek. Now, unrelenting, she cuffed him into the water. She hauled him out, squalling, and scrubbed him up and down in the grass. A sniff was apparently unsatisfactory. In he went again, and this time she pushed and rolled him clear across the tumbling current.

On the other side she scoured the pine needles with him and then, seemingly satisfied that her maternal duty was done, she shambled off into the woods, a picture of disgust. The cub followed meekly at her heels.

Marsh set the safety catch on his rifle, a little limp with relief. The five young people were plainly trying to pull themselves together, but both girls were having difficulty keeping their hands steady and the young men looked drawn about the mouth.

" I'm sorry," Marsh offered, " to have jumped you like

that. My name's Marsh Temple, and, honest, I usually have better manners."

They laughed somewhat shakily as they told him their names.

" Heavens, they're savage creatures! " exclaimed one girl.

Marsh said soberly: " Wild animals don't trust humans, and with good reason mostly, I guess. I've heard a mother deer will disown her fawn if it's been handled by a human, and if it's not old enough to eat grass, it simply starves."

" How awful! " said the girl.

" I get the idea," one of the fellows said. " People ought to let the wild creatures alone."

" That's O.K. by me! " another said fervently. " What would you do if you accidentally came across a bear? "

" Pretend you're Goldilocks," cracked someone.

" Seriously," said Marsh, after the laughter had died down, " there really isn't much risk. A she-bear with cubs is the only animal I can think of in this region that would attack a human. But it's a good idea to stick with your groups unless you carry a gun and know how to use it."

" We came west to see the Wild West, Tom," said one of the girls. " I guess we're seeing it."

" What a story we'll have! " said Tom, and broke off. " Good gravy, here I sat with my camera in the saddlebags and never took a single picture! Nobody'll believe we're not just making this up."

" I'd sign an affidavit for you," Marsh offered, " only I doubt if anybody would believe that either."

It would, he thought on the way home, make an excellent feature story for Marlou. He hurried into the house eager to give her the details and found Mom visiting with

Frank Irey, a farmer from out on Cat Creek.

" You were saying, Marsh," chuckled Mom, " that there are a lot of people in the Basin who haven't called on you yet. Apparently that won't last long."

" I was by your place today, Mr. Irey," Marsh said, " on my way out to Sloans'. Could have saved you a trip if I'd known."

" Don't know exactly what my trouble is," the farmer told him. " I've had some turkeys killed, and a few chickens. Two young lambs, and some little pigs. Wouldn't amount to much with one of the big outfits, but it's serious for me."

" Then it's serious," declared Marsh. " I'll be out first thing in the morning."

It was getting so he'd soon have to start keeping books on his numerous clients, Marsh reflected, as he drove away in the early light of the next day. Well, Woody had said he'd hear about more predation than you'd suppose possible.

Frank Irey was one of the few regular farmers in the Basin. He had land in a sheltered cove of Cat Creek, and he raised a few sheep, some cattle, chickens, turkeys, pigs, and even guinea fowl. These greeted Marsh raucously as he drove up to the house situated tidily among small, carefully irrigated and cultivated fields.

Marsh could find no print of coyote or sign of trading post. He was beginning to feel a sense of uneasy puzzlement when at last, by some trees on which the Irey turkeys roosted, not far from the house, he discovered the round prints of a cat.

" Here's your raider," he announced, relieved.

Frank Irey stared at the prints. " That the mark of a bobcat's paw? " he asked. " Doesn't look much different

from the old tom we keep around the barn for mice."

Marsh outlined the tracks carefully with a small stick. " Isn't much different," he agreed, " except for size. But it's a Uintah cat, all right, and if he'd stick to field mice and gophers, he'd be a useful neighbor. But since he's started on poultry — "

At a bend of the irrigation ditch Marsh found a likely cranny formed by some primrose bushes, and set his first Number 3 trap. He used six more traps to form a protective semicircle about the farmyard. This would be an easy job, he thought, for twenty minutes' walk from the Irey house would take him to all the traps.

" What's to prevent pigs or sheep from getting into those? " Mr. Irey wanted to know.

" Location," said Marsh. " A pig or sheep isn't going to force his way into those prickly bushes, and poultry wouldn't be interested. But a cat loves to investigate such nooks."

" By grab, you sure know your animals," declared Mr. Irey.

Marsh was in a comfortable frame of mind as he cut across by back trails to Rapellis'. Mr. Irey's statement was pleasing, of course, but true only in a relative sort of way. In all honesty, Marsh knew that Woody would have known almost without looking what the trouble was at Ireys', and would have located and made those sets in half the time. Yet when Marsh considered how little he knew when he started, he was amazed at how much he had learned.

Yet there was so much still to be learned. He wondered if there was any other way to learn it except by this slow accumulation of experience. He perceived that he could trap the Basin for half a century and still meet

situations that would be entirely new. Mr. Killion had spoken of taking a course. Marsh wondered if there was some course offered by correspondence that he ought to be taking.

From Rapellis' he rode along his trap line toward the Chiricahua River, noting as he went where gitter or trap had done its work. At the top of Escarpment Ridge he turned and began working his way back, resetting and reloading and picking up his prey.

Toward four o'clock he sighted another rider, far off to his right. It looked like Gus Garver. The only field glass Marsh owned was the telescope sight on his rifle. He drew the weapon and focused the sight on the distant figure. It was Gus, headed for home from this direction, carrying something behind the pinto's saddle. Marsh speculated idly on the greeting Gus would get from his querulous father, and returned to his work.

Half a mile farther on he pulled Oatbin up sharply. A dead coyote that had just been here on the up trip was now gone. Marsh circled and took his bearings again, to make sure he hadn't forgotten the location. There was no mistake. The gitter was fired; and the carcass atop a little rise was no longer there.

Marsh's mind flashed back to the glimpse he'd had of Gus Garver. Was that something behind Gus's saddle the dead coyote?

He whirled Oatbin and started off toward the Garver place at a hard lope. It was not more than four or five miles away, and if Gus had forgotten the caution Marsh had instilled in him about tampering with Government hunting that night at Middlesworths', Marsh intended to remind him. Forcibly!

Oatbin was sweating freely when Marsh rode up to the

Garver shack. Red Garver was taking the sun, his barrel chair tilted against the wall of the house by the door. The mongrel dog barked gloomily from behind the chair, cowering against the wall.

" Shut up! " Garver bawled at the dog. " Howdy, Marsh."

Marsh swung Oatbin around and dropped off, balancing on his toes. " Where's Gus, Mr. Garver? " he demanded.

" Heck and be hanged! " rasped Garver. " *I* don't know. Ain't been home for a week. You look around the pool hall in town? "

" No. I saw him heading this way not an hour ago."

" Did, huh? Well, he ain't showed up. You still want to see him? "

" I'll say I do! He — " Marsh broke off. His eye had gone to the corral; the pinto was not in sight. From where he stood he could see into the open shed that served as a barn, and there was no animal there, either. Gus actually hadn't come home. But he'd been heading — Baffled, Marsh swung to his saddle.

" I'll tell 'im you're lookin' fer 'im," offered Red Garver.

" Never mind," Marsh said. " I'll look him up."

He rode away, completely mystified. Finally he decided to go back to the place where he had seen Gus, and pick up his trail. It took him some time to locate the low saddle Gus had been riding through, and by the time he found the pinto's hoofmarks, it was so nearly dark that he could not follow the trail with any speed. He gave it up and went home.

Next morning Marsh drove over to the pool hall, but it

was not open at that early hour. He drove on. It was time he checked the gitters at Sloans' place, and he'd stop by Frank Irey's on the way. As for Gus, he'd as likely be in that direction as any other.

Frank Irey was irrigating a field of young oats, but when he saw Marsh, he stuck his long shovel in the ground and came clumping to the house in his high rubber boots.

" Lost a young turkey hen last night," he announced. " Wonder what happened? "

" Why, I don't know," said Marsh. " Let's have a look at those traps."

He was definitely uncomfortable as they took the short walk out to the first trap. Something had gone wrong.

At sight of the trap Marsh stopped abruptly, and his heart sank clear to his boots. He'd caught a cat, all right, but it was not wild.

" Well, by grab," said Frank Irey. " That's the old tom we kept in the barn."

Marsh said: " Mr. Irey, I'm sorry as all get out. You probably want to kick me off the place." He was sick with dismay. After he'd made such a splash setting his traps!

" Why," said Frank Irey, " the cat's no great loss, Marsh. Wasn't a pet or anything. Matter of fact, he had kind of a nasty disposition, and was wild. I guess I should have warned you he was pretty much of a prowler, but I never thought of it."

" *I* should have thought of it," growled Marsh.

Mr. Irey repeated tolerantly: " It's no great loss. A man is bound to make a few bobbles when he's new at his work."

Marsh would have felt better if the farmer had been

angry. That " new at his work " had completed his own humiliation. Not trusting himself to reply, he took the dead cat from the trap and stood debating whether to reset it.

" Still think you might catch the wildcat here? " inquired Mr. Irey.

Marsh said, " Hanged if I know." He felt, at the moment, as if he didn't know anything.

" I'm a lot more concerned about the stock than this cat," said Mr. Irey. " So forget him, and let's concentrate on getting his wild cousin."

Unreasonably, Marsh was angered. Having to be told how to manage his work! But with anger his mind cleared.

" I see where I messed it up," he said. " Set too close to the yard. Time the bobcat got this far, he'd have live prey in his nose, and the bait wouldn't attract his attention. I'll take up these traps and set three or four hundred yards farther out."

He seized the top of the trap stake and pulled. It failed to budge. He got the chain in his other hand and heaved. The steel stake remained in place. Marsh got out his hammer and pried with the claws. He shoveled away some of the earth with his trowel. He tugged until he was red and perspiring, and the stake stayed fast.

" Sometimes easy does it," suggested Frank Irey, with a hint of amusement. " That chain well fastened? "

" Yes," said Marsh, feeling like a fool.

Irey seized the chain near the trap and began to flip it upward sharply with a series of quick snaps. Inch by inch the stake emerged from the ground until, with a foot of it showing, Marsh was able to jerk it out.

" I'd better see to my water," the farmer said then, with

understanding. "You go ahead and put 'em wherever you like."

Marsh gloomily watched him stride back to his irrigation. If Gus Garver had come along at that moment, he would have handed him the traps and gitters and quoted him a bargain price on his personal equipment.

By the time he had reset the traps and driven on to Sloans' he had cooled down somewhat, but his confidence was still shaken. He rode up to his line of gitters in dark preoccupation, though the feel of Oatbin between his knees always was reassuring.

He found a fired gitter and turned to look for his coyote. There was none. He circled and searched, but it was gone.

Aroused, he rode back to the gitter. There were coyote prints near, but no human tracks, and no marks of a pine branch. He rode on rapidly.

Four times in the next hour and a half he found the same situation. He sat down on the ground, while Oatbin grazed, and collected his thoughts. There could be only one answer. Gus Garver was again stealing his prey from gitters and traps. How Gus was doing it this time without leaving sign he did not know.

He jumped to his feet and swung rapidly to saddle. But after a hundred yards he slowed. There was no use warning Gus again. That did no good. What he had to do now was get the evidence on him and turn him over to the law. The task couldn't be dodged any longer.

At least, he reflected, he had something to take his mind off the stupid failure he'd made at Ireys'. Or did he? When you came down to it, smart trapping and overcoming opposition both were part of his job. If he couldn't do his job, he'd better get out of it. There was

more to this business of finding yourself than just learning what you wanted to do. You had to prove you could do it.

Only now that he thought he knew what he wanted, it was a bitter pill to realize that so far he hadn't done much to demonstrate that he was really capable of being a successful Government hunter.

9

AT HOME that evening Marsh opened a letter containing his first pay check.

It was for only twenty dollars, covering the tag end of May. But it was pay he had earned from somebody not a friend of the family, and it carried his Social Security number, and the notation of a sum withheld for income tax.

Marsh went out and cleaned up the jeep, returned to his room for his best saddle jacket and good boots, and drove over to the ranger station. Diane was at the sewing machine when Mr. Ringland let Marsh in.

"Could I interest you," Marsh asked the girl, "in some of Chiricahua's night life? Like a sundae at the drug?"

"You not only could," she agreed; "you have."

When they were seated in a booth, she asked a question. "Why the concern about my nutrition? Is this an occasion?"

"We're celebrating my first pay check."

"Well, hooray! Marsh, after all your worries there at graduation time, you've gone on ahead of the rest of us, haven't you?"

" How do you mean? "

" We're all earning money, but it's different. Something to go to school on, or to get a start. You're started. Your own car, established in your permanent work — "

" I've found work I like," he agreed. He didn't add that he was hardly " established " in it. Two coyotes and Ireys' cat for a week's work wasn't a record to crow about.

" Dad was so impressed that you took the lion."

" Mr. Middlesworth and Mr. Rapelli aren't having losses any more, either," Marsh reflected aloud. " But something new is always coming up. Did you hear about the mother bear out at Sloans'? "

Telling the adventure to Diane whetted anew his own zest for the outdoors and his thinking. He remembered the story of a fellow who had grand ideas about being an engineer, but couldn't learn his multiplication tables. Marsh guessed he was in the same boat unless he could prove that he had what it took to meet the responsibilities of a professional hunter.

Later, at home, he tried to explain this to the family.

" Now that Gus has apparently rejoined the fray," he finished, " I will have to nail him, or admit I've failed at my job. And this time but good."

" Have him arrested and sent to prison," Mr. Temple mused. " The people versus Gus Garver. More truth than poetry. There ought to be a better answer than prison for the problem of Gus."

" Well," declared Marsh, " he's not going to get away with thieving my coyotes."

" That's not the answer, either. You'll have to do what you have to do."

" But you be careful," Mom ordered.

Marlou said nothing then, but later, as Marsh sat in

his den, she came in.

" The last time you went Garver-hunting — " she began.

" Oh, no," Marsh interrupted. " No, you don't."

" You don't need to thump your chivalry," advised his twin. " Who patched up whom after the last encounter? "

" That's not the idea. Or maybe it's exactly the idea. Hang it, I wish I could sometimes get across what I'm thinking."

" Could be you still ought to beat your so-called brains out on English."

" I'm not that desperate yet. I think I know now what I'd like to do if I find I've got the ability to do it. If I haven't, then I'm back where I started."

" Which will give us all nervous breakdowns. So I want to do my bit now, and not lose what we've gained."

" I appreciate that. No kid. But first it was Woody who carried me along. Then you. And I wouldn't have got the lion if it hadn't been for Savvy. This I've got to lick myself. You see? "

Marlou was thoughtful. " I guess everybody needs to feel he's standing on his own feet, but can't the rest of us at least be interested? After all, Dad talks over newspaper problems with Mom all the time."

Marsh said slowly: " I could use some ideas. Got any? "

" One. There has to be a reason for Gus coming back."

" Grudge," Marsh grunted.

She shook her dark curls. " A grudge would wear off, not restore his nerve to where he'd risk Federal prison again."

Marsh thought that over. " Well, how much does that matter? He's back."

" Somebody's put him up to it."

" Wagner? "

" That's my guess."

" But it's still Gus who's doing the dirty work. He's the one I've got to catch."

" My point is that no matter what you catch Gus doing, there's no use arresting him unless you can prove his connection with Wagner."

" You mean if I get Gus, but not Wagner — "

" You've only got half a worm," Marlou finished. " Less than half. There'll be a certain amount of underdog sentiment for Gus, which Wagner will be quick to capitalize on. You won't have met your real opposition at all."

" You sure haven't simplified matters," grunted Marsh. " Suppose Gus would squeal if I got him dead to rights? "

" He might. Looks as if I haven't given you any new plans. You still have to start with Gus. How will you do it? "

" I'm going to start watching every move he makes," Marsh declared. " I'll stick to him like a guilty conscience."

Next morning he drove about more or less at random, stopping at various places on his trap line and trying to pick up sign that Gus was in the neighborhood.

Finally he gave it up and sat in the jeep searching his mind for an idea. He even tried out theorizing where he'd go if he were a horse, but he soon realized Gus might be almost anywhere in the twenty-five hundred square miles of Chiricahua Basin. There was nothing for it, he guessed, but to look in all the likely places, and find the wanderer by a process of elimination. He might as well start at the Garver claim. Gus just might be at home.

Marsh parked the jeep on the dude ranch road beyond Manzanita Creek and rode Oatbin a circuitous route to a

spot across the valley from Garvers'. There he left the horse and reconnoitered on foot.

He topped a low ridge to look over the Garver place, and there *was* Gus, busily occupied on a little flat below the shack and ramshackle corral. Marsh could not tell what Gus was doing at the distance of nearly three quarters of a mile. He went back to get his rifle from the saddle.

Moving carefully in the shade, so that no glint of sunlight on metal would catch Gus's attention, he uncovered his telescope and centered Gus in the cross hairs. Gus was digging industriously, from time to time picking up something and dropping it in an old tin can, of which there were several nearby.

Digging fishworms! Marsh grinned wryly. Some desperado! But presently Gus stopped digging and looked carefully all around, apparently searching the country near and far. The uncanny sense of wild creatures had told him he was being watched, even though he could not, Marsh was sure, have seen anything. The hairs prickled along the back of Marsh's neck.

When after a while Gus caught up his calico horse, Marsh decided to follow. He had a competitive interest in seeing how long he could trail Gus without being discovered. And the guy must be going on a mighty fishing expedition, with at least half a dozen cans of worms in his saddlebags.

Gus cut across the road to Sloans' Lazy Time, Marsh easing along in his wake as close as he dared. Gus came upon the parked jeep and trailer, and stopped. Marsh drew his rifle. If Gus tried to sabotage the jeep — But after a look around, Gus rode on. Marsh debated taking to the jeep, and decided against it.

It took some fast maneuvering to get close enough to the Sloan place so that he could see what happened when Gus rode into the yard. Several of the paying guests congregated about Gus, and the cans of worms changed hands.

So Gus was selling bait to the fishing-minded among Sloans' dudes. He had sometimes picked up small change by selling bait or acting as guide. Mrs. Sloan spoke to him and he followed her into the house. When he came out, he was picking his teeth.

Marsh hoped Gus would go up to the coyote gitters set above the Sloan place, but he rode directly home. As soon as Marsh was certain of that, he returned to the jeep.

Well, he'd failed again. It seemed that always, just when he thought he was doing his best, he ended up like a kid grabbing soap bubbles. He got the jeep into the road and drove out to Ireys'. Might as well find out how many pussycats he'd caught.

" We haven't been bothered since you were here last," Mr. Irey told him. " And one of the neighbors gave us a new mouser for the barn."

Marsh looked at his traps, and returned in a short while greatly cheered.

" Here's one less menace anyway," he announced, holding up a bobcat's scalp. " Maybe he's the only one that was raiding you."

" Great! " exclaimed Frank Irey. " But I hope you didn't take your traps up."

" No," said Marsh. " I'll leave 'em awhile, if that's all right. Any cat that's sticking to natural prey won't bother 'em, and any that gets that close to your barn is up to no good."

" At least I've got something to put on my itinerary re-

port," he told his sister when he returned to town, " besides itinerary."

" Any closer to nailing the Garver hide to the wall? " she asked.

" I trailed him most of the day," Marsh said gloomily. " He was selling fishworms. Poof! You know it's funny: At first, when this job looked like an extended outing to me, I didn't know if I even wanted it. Now that it begins to look as if I couldn't hold it, I want it worse than I ever wanted anything in my life."

" I could make a crack," chirped his twin, " about the grass on the other side of the fence, but I don't believe that's it. Seems to me you've come a long way in the last month."

" Golly, is it July already? Hey, what about our lion skin? "

" Savvy brought the pelt for you today."

" I'm taking it right over to Wagner's," said Marsh. " He's the other guy I want to keep my eye on."

" This'll make up nice," Wagner told him, " with the kind of workmanship I can get you. Brought you fifty dollars bounty too, didn't it? "

" Not me. Savvy. A Government hunter can't take a bounty. But Savvy gave me the skin. It was his to do what he wanted with."

The fur dealer shook his well-groomed head. " You could make a good living as a bounty hunter, Marsh, knowing the business the way you do now. The ranchers would pay you a good price for taking coyotes and cats, and I'd buy your pelts. Why don't you pull away from the Government and be your own boss? "

" What have you got against the Government, Mr.

Wagner? " Marsh asked.

The fur buyer's voice was bitter. " Luxury taxes, income taxes. Taxes, taxes, taxes! They've taken off import duty on furs until the whole world production is dumped on the United States market. Furs from South Africa, furs from Scandinavia, furs from Russia. We owe a lot to Russia! "

" I don't see as my quitting would change that," said Marsh.

" The whole thing adds up, that's all. As long as people all over the country keep taking Government handouts all the time, letting the Government do what they could do themselves — The day is gone when we had small, independent fur craftsmen, men that took pride in the quality of their goods. Now it's all big companies dealing in ' ranch mink,' and ' Persian lamb.' Bah! "

" But you know one craftsman that's left? "

" I can get you good workmanship," Wagner said shortly. " I'll mark it ' Rush ' to be in time for the wedding."

Marsh knew his hope of winning over the fur dealer with the lion-skin business had failed. Wagner wasn't open for any winning over. It all looked as if Marlou was right. Ivan Wagner was his real opposition. Of course John Ledington disapproved of the program, but Mr. Ledington wasn't doing anything against him — as far as he could see. Since Mr. Killion's visit Mr. Ledington hadn't, Marsh guessed, even been talking. No, it was Marsh against Wagner and Gus Garver, and he couldn't pin a thing on either of them.

However, next day was the Fourth of July and, in common with everybody else in the Basin, Marsh laid aside business for a big holiday at Goldpan. He left at daylight

in the jeep, with Oatbin in the trailer, for he was keeping his promise to Savvy Diaz of competing with the bulldoggers at the rodeo.

First he went to the arena, paid his entry fee, and stabled Oatbin. Then he walked up the street to mingle with the gala holiday crowd. Once a year the little mountain village came to lusty life for a few hours, capitalizing to the full on Goldpan's glamorous history as a mining camp and on its near ghost-town atmosphere to stage a rip-roaring celebration.

Marsh came to the famous old West Drift Hotel and stopped short. Ivan Wagner was sitting on the hotel porch in conversation with John Ledington.

They looked up. " Hello, Marsh," Wagner nodded.

" Good morning, Marsh," came from Mr. Ledington.

Marsh said, " Good morning," and walked on. He noticed that they did not resume their talk until he was quite out of hearing. If those two were getting together —

Marsh moseyed on, only half aware of the people that thronged the streets — city folks who had summer houses nearby, and tourists in strange costumes. A line was moving in and out of the souvenir store. Marsh remembered that Mom was giving an exhibit of her Western landscapes, and joined the line. He kept hearing remarks of admiration from outgoing people, and set himself to remember them to tell Mom later. Her pictures really did look swell, set up on easels along both sides of the store.

" Hi, Mrs. Rembrandt," he greeted her.

" Hello," said Mom. " You're the first of my near and dear to drop in."

The line carried Marsh back to the street. He had taken half a dozen steps up the walk when he ran into Gus Garver. Gus was wearing a sateen shirt of screaming pink

and a cowhide vest decorated with a design so intricate that the eye rebelled.

In his astonishment, Marsh forgot for the moment his antagonism.

" Hear you're entered in the bulldoggin'," Gus growled without greeting.

" Why, yes, I am." Marsh's answer was automatic.

" So am I. You ain't got a chance."

Gus swung past and Marsh stared after him. Gus was wearing high-heeled boots instead of moccasins, but they failed to change his sinuous Indian stride, just as the gaudy replacements for his buckskin smock failed to alter his patched and faded jeans. What was going on here, anyway?

In another minute Marsh met Savvy Diaz with Rosa, radiant and beautiful, on his arm. It was good, for a change, to be undeniably among friends. But as he walked on up to the fading out of the town, where the mighty rock walls of Goldpan Gulch narrowed to stream width, and then turned back into the noisy, happy crowd, Marsh was sharply uneasy. Something was in the wind that he didn't understand, and neither did he like its smell.

Presently he looked at his watch and hunted up his family. The Temples had arranged a picnic with the Goodhues, the Ringlands, and Mr. and Mrs. Middlesworth. Marsh found the group gathered under a convenient tree, the women setting out fried chicken and potato salad, cake and ice cream. It was a gay and sumptuous meal.

" All these outsiders have got me clothes-conscious," Marlou remarked once. " Mom, what am I going to wear to the university? "

" Nothing that'll raise your grade in journalism,"

Marsh predicted.

" You have a narrow and uninformed point of view on these things," Diane told him. " I'm planning very carefully for the wardrobe I'll take to business school."

" Marlou," said Mrs. Goodhue, " Barbara and I are going to Denver soon to shop during the midsummer sales. Wouldn't you like to come along and visit the college shops? "

Definitely Marlou would, and Marsh, though he wouldn't have admitted it, was secretly pleased at the thought of his twin being smartly outfitted. Before the picnic broke up, he managed to draw her aside for a moment.

" Gus Garver's in town, with some new clothes and money for the entry fee in the rodeo," he said in an undertone. " Also, Ivan Wagner and John Ledington were over on the porch of the West Drift, chinning thick as thieves. What does that mean to a brain? "

Marlou considered, a tiny pucker between her eyes. " Nothing you could report to the sheriff," she decided finally. " Gus does wear out clothes and have to replace them. Mr. Wagner could be cultivating good will for his business, and Mr. Ledington is announcer for the rodeo."

" My nerves again? " asked Marsh.

" Maybe; but it does look odd. I'll keep my reportorial ear open."

" I was hoping that," Marsh nodded. " Thanks."

He strolled back downtown with Diane. All the local businessmen, operators of filling stations and restaurants and stores and tourist courts, had grown beards, and were decked out gaudily as cowboys or prospectors. Marsh and Diane stopped before a shooting gallery presided over by a grizzled, red-shirted miner.

" Hey," said that worthy, " only one prize to a customer. Rule I just thought of."

Marsh recognized, then, the proprietor of the souvenir store, and laughed with him. " Don't worry," he said. " No danger of me putting you out of business."

He did, however, knock over five of the moving targets in a row, and Diane selected an absurd doll from among the prizes. The gallery was then declared closed.

" It's near one o'clock anyway," the owner grinned, " and everybody is closin' up to go to the rodeo."

Soon the whole town was locked up and deserted. The population and the visitors crowded the wooden bleacher seats that ringed the quarter-mile oval arena.

As an opener, all contestants rode once around the field in parade. The parade and a loud-speaker system, manned today by Mr. Ledington as announcer, were the only concessions to the big professional rodeos. Otherwise, this was the sport in its native state, without foofaraw.

First there was a horse race. Some of the boys who fancied their own mounts raced twice around the track. Marsh knew then that he'd entered the wrong event. Oatbin, he was sure, could have passed the winner without working up a sweat.

The next competition was a " foot race," a hundred-yard dash of decidedly informal tone. The sprinters wore regular clothes, though most of them removed their spurs, and there must have been thirty of them. The winner was Ramón Diaz. " Time," Mr. Ledington added solemnly, " ten seconds flat," it being a point of Western honor that no foot race west of the Mississippi was ever won in slower time, even if you had to take your watch to the jeweler afterward.

For a while Ramón appeared to be the winner in the calf-roping too, with his time of twenty-eight seconds. Then Bill Goodhue spurted across the starting line on one of the Ladder G quarter horses, made a perfect cast, and seemed to have his pigging strings tied almost as soon as he hit the ground. In the midst of hearty applause Bill came and sat beside Marsh on the top rail of the corral fence.

" Bill Goodhue's time, twenty-one seconds! " came Mr. Ledington's voice out of the speakers. " Great work, Bill."

" Nice goin', guy," Marsh congratulated.

Bill grinned. " Wouldn't win day-money, even, at Cheyenne or Pendleton, but it's the best I've ever done."

" Anyway," said Marsh, " topping the bad ones is your dish."

" Not in the same ring with Savvy," Bill answered. " He'll ride the spurs off me. But I'll try."

At last the calf-roping was over, and Mr. Ledington's voice boomed across the arena. " Winner of the calf-roping, Bill Goodhue. Come and get the glory-bauble, Son."

Bill walked across the arena to the judges' stand, his blond hair glinting in the sun. There was generous applause, and Marsh made a mental note to josh Marlou about hearing her clapping above the crowd.

Mr. Ledington called for the bulldoggers, and Marsh got Oatbin and entered the ready corral. A judge rode up and pinned the number 7 to the back of Marsh's shirt, and Marsh was ready.

" Wait'll I take off my vest," came a heavy voice from across the corral. " Don't want no pinholes in that cowhide."

Marsh looked over at Gus Garver, riding his pinto, and

for the thousandth time wondered about these sudden evidences of prosperity. He wished he knew if Marlou had found out anything about John Ledington and Ivan Wagner.

" Number 7 in the next wrastle," called Mr. Ledington. " Marsh Temple, the Government hunter from Chiricahua. Trap that critter, boy."

Marsh straightened with a start. He'd been in a brown study for a good many minutes. He rode through the corral gate and reined Oatbin around beside the mouth of the chute and nodded at the pickup man — a Ladder G puncher — on the other side.

The chute gate shot up and a burly-horned steer spurted out like the pit from a squeezed cherry. Marsh leaped Oatbin to the animal's side. The starting line blurred past beneath.

Marsh touched his left spur to Oatbin. The horse surged forward, came even with the steer's horns. Marsh leaned and grabbed. The steer swerved. Marsh missed with his right hand, caught a horn in his left.

Convulsively he kicked his feet free of the stirrups and leaped. As he came down, he at last got that right horn. For a second he let the steer's shoulder carry his weight. Then he swung his body forward and dug his heels into the ground.

Dust plowed up in a fog around him. Every lunge of the steer shook him to his jaw teeth. The crowd was a blur, its cheering a far, dim noise. There was sweat in his eyes, and his hands were slipping.

With his left hand, Marsh reached across and grabbed the right horn. He got an arm around the animal's muzzle. He dropped his weight and heaved until he could feel tendons creaking. At least the shattering plunges stopped.

Then slowly the animal toppled, first the front and then the hind legs. It came down crashing. Marsh kicked clear of the jerking horns and lay beside the steer, panting. He looked up to see the Ladder G puncher holding Oatbin by the reins. He came to his feet and jumped to saddle fast, before the steer could get up.

" Marsh Temple's time, a minute and ten," called Mr. Ledington. " Maybe the cuss was standin' on his convictions, Bub."

Automatically, Marsh made a defiant gesture in the direction of the judges' stand and the derisive shouts that mingled with the handclapping as he rode out of the arena. Half of Mr. Ledington's function, of course, was to josh the contestants, but, remembering the Ledington-Wagner conversation this morning, Marsh wasn't too sure that remark was entirely in the spirit of good, clean fun.

He stabled Oatbin and returned to the top corral rail. " One minute and ten hours," he laughed to Savvy.

" You forgot your rifle," Savvy retorted good-humoredly.

" I'll be jiggered," added Bill Goodhue, meaning he couldn't understand Marsh's poor showing.

Marsh joined the laugh, for in the code of these rough sports there is no place for polite sympathy unless a man is actually hurt. " At least I beat that guy," said Marsh, nodding.

The present contestant had indeed lost his steer completely.

" No time," droned Mr. Ledington. " Shoulda salted his tail, Bub."

" One-ten," jeered a heavy voice behind Marsh. " Critter never knowed you worked for the Gover'ment,

Marsh."

Marsh turned, but before he could say anything, Mr. Ledington called: "Number 13, Gus Garver. Git 'im, big boy."

Gus rode out to the chute.

The gate flashed open and the steer shot forth. Gus roweled the paint horse, and the pony dashed out. Gus left the saddle just as he cleared the starting line, and landed on his feet. The great shoulders heaved. The steer swung away.

Then Gus flipped himself high in the air and vaulted clear across the steer's back. A half gasp, half yell, went up from the crowd. Gus's maneuver had turned the steer into him, thrown it off balance. Gus swung his feet forward, dug his heels, and hurled his weight savagely against the steer's shoulder, at the same time giving another violent twist to the horns.

The steer turned in mid-stride and went flat on its side. Momentum sent it skidding along the ground, dust flying.

Gus came to his feet and flung his right fist high. A tremendous yell burst spontaneously from the crowd, and Gus remounted in the midst of pandemonium.

"Gus Garver's time, fourteen and a half seconds!" shouted Mr. Ledington, and the audience went wild.

"Cryin' out loud!" Marsh yelled. "That's professional time, Gus!"

"That's twistin' 'em, Gus!" bawled Bill, as Gus rode by.

"You took the medal with that time, Gus," cried Savvy.

The rest of the bulldogging was, indeed, pretty much a formality, though a chunky youth from a ranch down

Fort Royal way did win hearty applause by throwing his steer in a half minute.

" Haw! Fourteen and a half seconds. How ya like that, one-ten big shot? "

Marsh turned to look down at Gus, standing in the corral behind him. " You sure took him, Gus. Left me in the shade."

" Always said you wasn't such a big shot on your own hook," sneered Gus. " One-ten! Haw, haw."

Marsh swung his legs over and stepped down. " I said you beat me, Gus," he repeated evenly. " Now do you want to leave it there, or you want to make something more of it? "

" Winner in the bulldogging," came Mr. Ledington's voice: " Gus Garver, by a wide margin. Front and center, Gus."

Gus turned away toward the judges' stand, but not before Marsh caught a fragment of bumbled sentence:

". . . can't stand guys that are stuck on theirself."

Marsh remounted the fence, his mind churning anew. Never before had he known Gus to invite so openly a clash of fists. Mostly Gus was bluster and bravado, and would fight only when he was cornered and couldn't get out of it. That had occurred often enough, Marsh thought, for Gus could never resist opening his big mouth. Got away with it a lot too, because he had a reputation for being a dirty, if not particularly good, fighter. Marlou must be right that Wagner had done something to put new spunk in Gus. But what?

Gus got a big hand when he went up for his medal. In a way Marsh was glad, for Gus had given a remarkable performance. But the applause only proved that Gus could easily become the Basin people's favorite under-

dog. When he caught up with Gus, there could be heck to pay.

" What you've all been waiting for! " announced Mr. Ledington. " The saddle bronc-riding."

Savvy Diaz moved into the corral with Bill, and Gus returned to get a new number pinned to his shirt. The excitement rose a noticeable notch, for to a Western crowd a rodeo is just one event, with trimmings. That one event is bronc-busting.

A couple of riders made their bid, and were thrown. Then Mr. Ledington shouted: " Next the star bulldogger Gus Garver, coming out of Chute 2 on Sundance."

A sweating rig man threw open the chute gate. There was the usual side scrambling and rearing before Sundance got in the clear. Gus came out holding his hat high, reins tight, raking his spurs, ready to make a pretty ride.

Sundance, a big sorrel, made three jerky jumps. He spun around once and started in a circle, crowhopping, an awkward gait between a canter and a gallop, with an occasional humping of his middle. Marsh, making no claims as a bronc stomper, could have ridden him straight up. Sundance simply hadn't much buck in his system.

The ten-second gun boomed, and a pickup man darted his horse close in to lift Gus off. The other pickup man hazed Sundance into the unsaddling corral. Gus clumped to the fence and climbed up at the far end. A bronc-buster would far rather be thrown than draw a horse that wouldn't buck. Gus would be toned down for a while, and Marsh decided he would enjoy the rodeo.

Presently Mr. Ledington called: " Bill Goodhue, Number 15, coming out on Windmill. Can't use your rope, Son."

Windmill was a wild-eyed buckskin that was well-named. He reared high and pawed the air. He plunged forward and kicked up his hind feet until he threatened to somersault. Bill's spurs were down around the horse's ears and he was lying back almost flat. The buckskin reversed his maneuver, rearing until he seemed ready to fall backward, the most deadly trick in the outlaw's bag.

Bill must have feared the back fall too, and loosened his grip. When Windmill came down once more and went forward, Bill kept right on going. He landed on hands and knees three yards in front of the horse, and two pickup men shot forward at top speed. One shoved Windmill aside, and the other picked Bill from the dust. Bill returned to the fence top unhurt amid much hoorawing.

Finally Mr. Ledington announced: "Last ride by Number 23. That's Savvy Diaz, from up on Little Owl Crick. You handlers tell that Three O'clock in the Morning horse to be careful. Can't have anything happen to Savvy that won't heal up in the next sixteen days."

That brought a roar of laughter, for all the natives knew of Savvy's marriage set for the twentieth. Marsh could picture Rosa blushing somewhere in the crowd.

The gate went open and there was an explosion of horseflesh. Three O'clock was a close-coupled black, and he came out with a spine-tingling bawl, sunfishing. Savvy waved his bowl-brimmed sombrero at every jump, and combed that black mane with alternate strokes of his big spurs. Sunlight flashed from his silver conchas.

Four towering jumps, and Three O'clock plowed dirt. Savvy's sinewy body swayed gracefully with the crashing jolt. A yell burst from the crowd.

The wild horse whipped into the air, reversed himself, leaped and whirled again, swapping ends. Savvy, high in

the saddle, leaned easily, twisting him pretty. The crowd came to its feet with a roar. The horse changed to weaving — tremendous, racking plunges to first one side and then the other.

Savvy swung his hat in a circle, and his high, challenging *vaquero* yell pierced the noise. Marsh was standing with everybody else in a shrieking frenzy. Somewhere in the maddened uproar the timer's gun must have sounded, but no one heard it. Savvy rode the brute to a standstill, and when the pickup men finally caught up, Three O'clock in the Morning was reduced to a series of tame crowhops.

The pandemonium of approval billowed across the arena and bounced off the surrounding mountains. Savvy went striding across the arena to receive his prize, and there, by gracious forethought of the judges, was Rosa to give it to him, and kiss him prettily. The Basin folk, to the last man, yelled with all their power.

That ended the rodeo. The people streamed out and went in search of food. After supper they returned for an hour-long display of fireworks by courtesy of the Goldpan Chamber of Commerce.

Then they adjourned in a body to the dance in the historic, ornate brick Firemen's Hall. The picturesque old building was a relic of the days when Hose Company Number One was the town's chief social club.

With Diane lovely in a pale-green dress of wispy material, the dance was a decided success for Marsh. The orchestra was a piano, two violins, a guitar, and a cornet manned by a lumberjack who had some uncertainties regarding transposition. But that dimmed the enthusiasm not a whit.

Marsh noted with a bit of brotherly pride that Marlou,

vivid in white, was busy and radiant. Bill Goodhue complained whimsically that he had a sore shoulder, he'd been tapped on it by so many guys cutting in.

Sometime after midnight the orchestra reached the limit of endurance and swung into the strains of " Home, Sweet Home," amidst a chorus of protesting calls. But the celebration was over, and Chiricahua Basin returned reluctantly to the business of ranching and farming and trade. And hunting.

Marsh, piloting jeep and trailer down the windings of the dusty highway, was impatient for the new day. Time, he had a feeling, was running out on him. If his adversaries had joined forces, his only chance was to get them before they got him. Or give up. And he'd be hanged if he'd give up until he had to.

10

MARSH had to take time next morning to inspect his trap lines, though he fully expected that Gus would have taken any prey before he got to them. He drove down the state highway to where his line looped up past Ledingtons' to Middlesworths', intending to start from there. As he approached the place, a rider came galloping toward him. Marsh pulled up quickly.

The rider was John Junior Ledington, face white and streaked with dirt — or perhaps tears. Marsh stared at the boy.

" Marsh," said John Junior, " I want you to come put some of those guns in our upper pasture."

Marsh said, surprised, " What goes on? "

" The coyotes — " The boy's voice broke. " While we were gone to the rodeo yesterday, coyotes killed Fritz."

" Oh, golly! " exclaimed Marsh in sympathy. " Hey, that's tough. Coyotes were running the dogs over at Sloans' place awhile back. Seems to be a bad year for coyotes."

" Dad says the wild ones musta smelled my pet pup and been attracted. Us not being there, they ganged up on Fritz. We f-found him right by the pen."

" I'm sure sorry," Marsh said awkwardly.

" Dad turned the pup loose. I was going to kill it. I hate coyotes. I hate all coyotes."

" Now, wait a minute," Marsh protested. " You don't hate wild animals, or love 'em, any more than they hate or love you."

" Dad loves 'em. I want him to get you to kill off the dirty boogers, and he won't."

" Then your dad still doesn't want me putting cyanide guns on your place? " Marsh asked.

The boy shook his head. " Don't make any difference; I'll watch out for Dad."

Marsh said gently, " I can't make any sets on your place without your dad's permission, John Junior."

" Then I'm leavin'! " John Junior cried passionately. " I won't live on a dirty old place crawlin' with mangy coyotes. I'll leave home first."

Marsh thought rapidly, trying to hide his consternation.

" Tell you what," he said finally. " Let's go back to your house and talk it over with your dad. Maybe he's got some ideas in mind we ought to hear. It couldn't do any harm."

But as the boy turned to ride beside the jeep, Marsh, driving slowly, had only one idea in mind. That was to get this grief-stricken kid back where he belonged as soon as he could.

They arrived to find a scene Marsh would as soon have missed. Louise Ledington, her father, and her mother were gathered beside a dog-sized grave on a little knoll above the house.

The coyote is a wolf and fights, Marsh knew, in the dash-and-slash style of the wolf. At close quarters he turns on his back to rip with his claws. And yet it seemed un-

believable that this heap of torn and bloody fur laid out on an old piece of carpet could once have been a dog.

Marsh said awkwardly: " I happened to see John Junior, and he told me what had happened. I'm mighty sorry."

Louise hid her face against her mother and began to sob.

" Fritz was like a member of the family," Mrs. Ledington said, her voice unsteady.

" Give me a lift, John Junior," said Mr. Ledington. The boy took one end of the carpet. Marsh saw tears splash on the matted fur.

Marsh said, to get the kids' minds on something else: " You'll need another dog to help with the cattle. I remember Pablo talking about a new litter of pups up at the Middlesworths' a month or so ago. They're a good strain of shepherd."

" We'll go up and see Cal this afternoon." Mr. Ledington took it up, gratitude in his voice. " I'm glad the youngsters are old enough to help train the new one. It's quite a job."

" What's the good o' gettin' a new dog? " John Junior demanded shrilly. " Long as we got these coyotes on the place we can't expect anything but that it'll get killed. If you'd let Marsh get after the dirty boogers — I won't have any truck with a new dog long as the place is crawlin' with coyotes."

Mr. Ledington said quietly: " It ought to be plain to us all, at this time, that killing is never a right thing." He began to shovel dirt into the dog's grave. Marsh took another shovel and helped with the task.

John Junior steadied himself. " I don't see — " the words came indistinctly " — what difference it'd make to

Marsh. He kills coyotes all the time anyway."

Automatically Marsh said, " That doesn't mean I'm nothing but a killer, John Junior."

" I've wondered sometimes, though," said Mrs. Ledington, " how you could bear to kill the wild creatures, Marsh. You know their ways and their lives so well. Don't you get a feeling for them? "

" Yes." Marsh picked his way aloud among his thoughts. " I've learned a lot about lions and bears and bobcats, and coyotes especially. I know, for instance, that the father coyote takes turns with the mother coyote in guarding the den and taking meat to the pups. If one is killed, the other will raise the pups by itself."

" The father and mother stay together for life too," said Louise. " Just like people."

Marsh shook his head. " No," he said. " It makes a pretty story, but they don't. The notion got started because instinct takes a coyote back to the same denning ground every year at a certain season. If both show up, they raise another family. If not, one takes another mate. Sometimes the first wife is delayed, and when she gets there Pop is already married again. Which makes no difference: she just moves in next door and Mr. Coyote supports two families."

" That's not very nice," declared Louise.

Marsh smiled at her. " Those are animal ways. But you see why I can't get very sentimental about a coyote. The Mexicans call him *El Señor Coyote,* and they have some mighty interesting stories about what he says and does and thinks. But it doesn't seem right to me to give human character to a wild animal, and I know the smarter Mexicans, like Savvy Diaz, don't take too much stock in those stories."

" Then you don't think it's wrong to kill coyotes? " demanded John Junior.

" Now wait a minute," Marsh protested. " You're getting me mixed up. Of course it's wrong to go around killing anything just to be killing, or so you can blow about it. That's not the point."

" Then what is the point? " Mr. Ledington asked.

Marsh sensed that what he said now would be very important. He tried to think clearly.

" The way I see it, my job is to protect the property of folks in the Basin. If coyotes are bothering, I trap the coyotes. I don't just go looking for coyotes to kill. Isn't there a difference, or don't I make sense? "

" You make sense," Mr. Ledington said slowly. " That man Killion you brought out here made sense too. But I'm not sure you always work according to the policies you claim."

Marsh, startled, wondered if his ears were playing him tricks.

" My mind's not closed," said Mr. Ledington. " Certainly I'm not ready to go along with Ivan Wagner. He was wanting, yesterday, to get up a petition through the Land and Livestock Owners Association protesting the Fish and Wildlife Service hunting in the Basin. I told him I'd talked with the district supervisor, and I wasn't sure now that it's entirely a bad thing."

Marsh scarcely breathed. His ears weren't deceiving him.

" Then will you let Marsh hunt off our coyotes, Pop? " asked John Junior. " Will you, Pop? "

" I don't know," said Mr. Ledington. " They're getting too thick; that's plain. But a certain number of coyotes — "

" We'd not have to take any more than you wanted taken." Marsh suddenly found his voice. " If you just wanted 'em thinned out, that's how it would be. We'd watch how things went, and take up the sets whenever you said."

" Is that a guarantee? " Mr. Ledington asked after a moment.

" Cryin' out loud! I'll say it is."

" Then go ahead. At least I'll have a chance to make up my mind what to think about your program. Only I want this limited."

Marsh said eagerly: " I'd be glad if you'd go along with me and check every set I make. Or John Junior."

Mr. Ledington looked at his son. " I think we'll both go," he decided. " Will you saddle me a horse, John Junior? "

Never on any sets had Marsh lavished such care as he bestowed on every gitter in the Ledington west pasture. He selected each location with consideration for all the details he knew, and then discussed the site with Mr. Ledington. He pointed out his reasons for choosing the place, and the area it might be expected to control.

" I'll say one thing, Marsh," Mr. Ledington commented. " You certainly go at this intelligently."

A Congressional medal wouldn't have made Marsh half so happy. He managed to conceal his elation only by constantly reminding himself that this was happening because the Ledingtons were deeply grieved over the loss of Fritz, but he could hardly wait to get home with the news.

" I still have to pinch myself," he declared, as they talked it over at lunch. " Mr. Ledington was the one person against me who sometimes had me feeling as though I was in the wrong."

" John had to be convinced by reason," said Mr. Temple. " Not only have you won a notable victory, Marsh, but the soundness of the Fish and Wildlife Service policy has been proved. Now what of Garver? "

Marsh had forgotten Gus.

After the meal he went out to the equipment shed, where he could busy his hands while he pondered plans. Marlou followed him.

" One down and two to go," she commented.

He nodded. " It's narrowed down. Garver and Wagner. If only I could prove they're in cahoots. If I knew exactly what Gus is doing — besides selling fishworms — " He pinched together the paraffin wrapping around a pellet of strychnine and lard, and tossed the work aside. " Wait till I get Oatbin loaded into the trailer and I'll drive you up to the *Tribune* office."

As they rode up the street, he said: " If I don't show up for dinner, tell Mom I said I might be late getting back. I've still got the lunch in my pail. I'm going to try to pick up Gus's trail at the Garver place again, this time after fishworm hours."

He waited until late in the afternoon to make his approach to Garvers'. He rode carefully, keeping Oatbin at a walk, following draws so that he would not be sky-lined, staying among trees for cover. His eyes scanned the surroundings constantly.

Suddenly Oatbin snorted. Marsh instantly gripped with his legs to discourage another nicker and leaned far forward to grasp the horse's nose. Not a sound reached his ears, and his searching eyes saw nothing amiss. He slid to the ground.

Yet the instant his nose was released, Oatbin snorted again. Marsh made another grab for the muzzle. He wished desperately that he could understand horse lan-

guage. Oatbin was no false alarmist, whether it was stalking a lion or spying an enemy. Marsh looked at him again. Those inquiring ears were pointed ahead and just a bit to the right where the draw they were following ran into a larger gulch coming down the mountain from the right.

Marsh slid forward and a little to the left, leading the horse among the thickest trees. Oatbin kept swinging his head insistently toward the junction of the gulches, yet he showed no tendency to shy, seemingly not alarmed.

A hundred yards farther on, Marsh caught a foul odor on a vagrant air current. The odor was familiar. In a moment he identified it — dead coyote. He had no feeling of being watched, and neither, apparently, did the horse. Probably they had only come upon a dead coyote, likely one trapped some time ago by Gus. The Garver shack was not much more than a mile away.

Marsh mounted and rode on to investigate. At the juncture of the gulches the odor was powerful, but no coyote carcass was in sight. The bank of the gulch was high and sheer, but in one place it had caved. Actually, the rank smell seemed to come from under the heaped loose rock and earth at the foot of the cave-in. Marsh wondered if a coyote could have been caught in a landslide. That didn't seem very likely. He looked around more carefully.

At that moment a flick of motion caught his eye. It was gone before he could focus, but he knew it had been a rider crossing a high clearing far off in the now thick dusk.

Maybe Gus, maybe not. Marsh mounted quietly and swiftly and followed as fast as he dared. The odorous cut-bank could wait. If the momentary blur was Gus, he might be on his way to rob the Government trap lines. If it weren't Gus, Marsh knew he was on a wild-goose chase.

But if he waited to make sure, Gus might get away — if it was Gus.

Half an hour later he lined a moving figure against the starlight. He risked a ten-minute trot down a comparatively open slope, riding entirely by instinct. He forded the Chiricahua River and climbed to the state highway.

He had another glimpse of the dark figure, heading for Ledingtons'.

Along the edge of the Ledington place grew trees enough for a cover which the denuded state land did not afford. Marsh rode fast down the highway to Ledingtons' fence, followed it up to the area where his cyanide guns were set, hid Oatbin in a thicket, and stationed himself to watch and wait. As the minutes dragged by, the chance and guesswork on which he was depending began to seem more questionable.

Then a mounted figure appeared.

At last Marsh was sure the rider was Gus, from the bulk

of him and the way he sat the horse.

Gus crossed the fence at a rocky stretch. He did not dismount, and Marsh surmised he had found a broken post he could turn down and later set back in place. At any rate, the fence caused him little delay.

Marsh moved silently after him on foot.

Inside the Ledington pasture, Gus moved directly to the site of a gitter. He rode about a bit and then leaned far down. When he straightened, there was effort in his movement. Marsh gritted his teeth. There went a coyote that belonged to him. The procedure was repeated.

When Gus left, Marsh tailed him with extreme caution. Anger made it almost impossible for him to hold back. Only the hope of learning what Ivan Wagner had to do with this kept him from charging out and taking Gus to Chiricahua at gun point.

The tedious chase led back to where it had started — the junction of the gulches and the sheer bank. By the time Marsh had maneuvered to come up the wind and get Gus in sight, Gus was at the top of the bank, apparently shoveling. Presently a sizable chunk of earth slid away and tumbled into the gulch.

Now at last Marsh understood. Gus was burying the coyotes under rubble he caved off the sheer bank. This was where he'd come the day he'd been seen heading for home but hadn't been found there.

His shoveling done, Gus headed directly for Chiricahua. Marsh was bursting with excitement. Maybe Gus was going to meet Wagner. Maybe he could take them both this very night.

A mile from Chiricahua, Gus stopped at a deserted claim shack that had stood back from the Geehaw Creek road, weathering away with the years, ever since Marsh could remember. Gus went inside, returned quickly, and

headed for home along his back trail. Marsh had a scramble to keep from being discovered.

He stared into the darkness after Gus. What did this mean? He decided against following and turned his attention to the shack.

There was no sign of life in the place, but Marsh slid through the door with the rifle held in front of him. Inside was complete blackness and silence. He groped about.

Without warning, hair brushed his face. He leaped wildly, leveling his rifle and snapping off the safety catch. " Don't move! " he breathed hoarsely.

There was no answer.

The sound of his own heart was like the beat of a clock measuring out the tight minutes. After an agonizingly long time he decided to risk a match. He squatted and struck it on the rough floor with his left hand. At least it would break the unbearable tension.

In the murky glare of the match something dangled in the air. The match scorched his fingers and he struck another.

Suspended from a rafter by a wire was a cluster of coyote tails. They were fresh; the blood had not congealed on some of them where they had been hacked off the carcass. Marsh struck more matches. In one corner of the room the floor was broken. He stared down into a hole in the ground that was rather deep and contained a dirty, grayish mass.

Then he saw on the nearby floor a partly emptied sack of quicklime. He took another look into the hole. As nearly as he could figure out what was happening, Gus picked up the coyotes, cut off their tails, and buried the rest of the carcasses under that cut-bank. The tails were brought here and destroyed in this lime pit. That was what happened, but what was the point?

Baffled, he went home. He felt a definite need to get Marlou's sharp mind to work on this.

" I understand one thing," Marlou declared when, next day, he finished his account. " Gus is bounty-hunting."

" Clear that," said Marsh. He was not riding trap line today, and his twin was with him in the jeep, parked near the edge of town, to discuss the puzzle.

" Somebody — likely Ivan Wagner — is paying Gus so much a tail. Same as any bounty system, scalps, tails, whatever. An animal has only one."

" Why take 'em to the old shack? "

" To count. Wagner can slip into that deserted place with little chance of being seen. The pay-off could take place anywhere. No incriminating evidence."

" Soon as he's counted 'em, Wagner destroys the tails with quicklime so Gus can't collect on 'em again," Marsh said reflectively. " He doesn't trust Gus completely. It adds up. But why bury the carcasses under that cut-bank? "

" Also to destroy evidence. It keeps you from getting the scalps, and discredits you as a hunter."

" You can say that again," Marsh grumbled. He pulled an envelope from his pocket. " Take a look at this Service newsletter. ' Temple, Chiricahua: coyote 10, cat 3.' Just about the poorest record in the district, and me with an untrapped territory."

" There are some with less," said Marlou, scanning the report.

" Established territories with experienced trappers that have got predation under control. I ought to be averaging better than a coyote a day, and I am, only they're buried under a cut-bank out Arroyo Manzanita way."

" You can now put a stop to that," she pointed out, " in nothing flat."

" Think I've got enough to stick Wagner too? "

She shook her head regretfully. " Wagner is the big one that got away."

" He is like fun! " flared Marsh. " I'm not going to see Gus take the whole rap when I know Wagner's the one responsible."

" Which you are going to prove how? "

" Why," Marsh vowed, " I'll trail Wagner till I catch him going to the shack."

" No use doing it the hard way. Gus will tell you that as soon as he's faced with prison."

" Then — " Marsh let the words trail off. " There's not a thing in the world to prove Wagner knew those were tails from Government coyotes, is there? "

" Not even if you had a color picture of Gus handing Wagner the tails and Wagner giving Gus the money. He's been too slick, Marsh. Probably he never even mentioned your coyotes to Gus. Just offered him a bounty for coyote tails, knowing he'd figure out where to get them. And there's no law against a man offering a bounty for coyote tails, especially if he does it, as he would probably say, simply to encourage a boy."

" I can't fancy Wagner putting out solid dough for the sake of — Hey! Why *does* he do it? "

" That," said Marlou, " is the sixty-four-dollar question."

" It's costing him plenty." Marsh did mental arithmetic. " I'll bet Gus is getting at least a dollar a tail, the chance he's taking. The way he's been grabbing coyotes off me, that twenty-five a month Wagner used to put into the *Tribune* ad wouldn't cover it. What makes it so important to him for me to be a flop? "

Marlou sighed. " I give up. There's some angle to it we don't know about."

" Plenty about Wagner we don't know. We don't even know the name of the guy he's having make our rug."

" Marsh! " she cried. " You suppose that's it? Suppose there's something about that connection? "

" I can't imagine what," he answered.

" Neither can I, but if we knew who it is — "

" The name will be on the shipping label when the rug comes."

" Not when we get it," Marlou declared. " Wagner's been careful never to mention that name."

" Well, we could meet the truck from Denver when it comes in at the freight warehouse," Marsh said.

" Let's! " urged the girl. " And let's go now to see when Wagner expects the rug. I feel like bearding a lion in his den."

Marsh started the jeep. " O.K. After that I guess it's me to the sheriff's office to lower the boom on Gus."

" Could that wait awhile? " she asked.

" What for? "

" To see if we get anywhere on this? "

" I don't see," Marsh said irritably, " what good it's going to do to find out the name of whoever is making that rug."

" Neither do I;" she admitted. " But I'm going to Denver in a few days with the Goodhues. If I know the name of the place, I'll look it up. I might learn something that would snag Wagner. It looks like our only chance."

" I guess a few more days won't make or break me," Marsh grumbled. " But if the district office starts pushing me — "

Ivan Wagner, greeting them, was pleasantly and impersonally businesslike.

" Not yet," he said. " I'll let you know as soon as I get word."

As they drove away, Marlou said, " I still want to be on hand when the freight truck gets in."

" I'm doing it your way for a while," Marsh answered, " but I have a feeling I ought to be getting Gus."

They went over to the truck line's warehouse some time before the truck was due that evening. Ivan Wagner was also there.

" You needn't have bothered," he said to them, a hint of edge to his voice. " I told you I'd let you know right away."

" We're just so anxious for it to be here in time for Rosa and Savvy's wedding," murmured Marlou, with an air of such wide-eyed youthful innocence that Marsh almost choked.

" I really don't expect it until next week," Wagner said sharply.

They moved away. " Then what's *he* waiting for? " Marlou whispered.

" That's right," Marsh whispered back. " Let's loaf across the courthouse lawn and get back here when the truck arrives."

They returned to the freight house just as the big diesel van pulled in. The driver started unloading.

" Rug for Wagner Wool and Hide," he said to the man checking the shipment.

" I'll take it," Ivan Wagner said quickly, and reached for the package. " I'm surprised it came so soon," he told Marsh. " Have to inspect it and record it on the books. You can get it first thing in the morning."

Marsh took a quick step forward. He wasn't letting — He felt the sharp pressure of Marlou's hand on his arm, their " Let's go " signal. He looked down at her, and permitted Wagner to walk away.

" I got it," she explained in a whisper. " Empire Furs,

1792 Jefferson. I read it upside down on the shipping label."

"The advantages of education," muttered Marsh. "Now what do we do with the information?"

"That," returned his sister, "remains to be seen. But for some reason, Wagner's trying to hide this Empire Furs!"

They arrived at home to find the Goodhues visiting.

Mrs. Goodhue smiled at Marlou. "Sales advertised in the paper. Shall we start day after tomorrow, early?"

"I'll be ready at daylight," promised Marlou.

Later she and Bill departed for the Friday evening show at the Bijou, and Marsh called up Diane and joined them. But he had a hard time keeping his attention on the picture. He kept wondering which of his traps and gitters Gus was visiting this evening, and whether he was derelict in his duty not to have called in the law. What would Mr. Killion think, or Woody?

Next morning the rug was spread out on a counter at the Wagner Wool and Hide, almost golden in its lustrous sheen.

"It's really lovely," Mrs. Temple said. She and Mr. Temple were with the twins.

Ivan Wagner almost crooned over it. "There is a piece of workmanship. Look at that stitching. You don't often see the like nowadays, even in garments."

"Who does your work, Ivan?" Dad inquired.

"I have a regular man I send all these jobs to," Wagner answered. "Would you like it gift-wrapped?"

The twins looked at each other. "It would be nice," said Marlou.

Wagner drew a big box from under the counter and lined it with white tissue. He nestled the rug in reverently.

The price he named was surprisingly low.

Marsh reached for his billfold.

" Plus twenty per cent Federal tax," Wagner added.

Marsh said sharply: " It was my fur. How come tax? "

Wagner shrugged. " The Federal Government requires the tax to be paid on all finished fur articles. Perhaps the money goes to the Fish and Wildlife Service."

Marsh bit back a retort. He thought the Service was supported by a tax on livestock, but he knew nothing would erase the sardonic amusement in Wagner's black eyes.

They took the rug out to Rosa and then sped back to town so that Marlou could pack to go to Denver. Marsh could not get himself started to work. He puttered about the shed for a long time, wondering if he was losing interest in his job. Finally he went in to his sister's room.

" I think we better call this off," he told her. " That joint may be some back-alley establishment in the muckiest section. No telling what might happen if you start prowling around."

" Relax, chum," scoffed Marlou. " A city's full of policemen. If I encounter any sinister characters, I'll run up to an officer and ask the way to the bus station. All you have to do is lay off Gus until I get back. Promise? "

" I suppose so. I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

" Because it's the only chance left to get Wagner," she reminded him. " A mighty slim chance, maybe, but if you take Gus and scare Wagner into covering up, he'll for sure go scot free."

Marsh looked doubtful. " I don't like it, but I can't think of anything else." He groaned. " Sometimes I think I'm not decisive enough to be a hunter, or anything else."

11

FOR two days Marsh rode his trap lines from dawn till dark. Everywhere he went his traps were sprung and his gitters fired. He regretted more and more his promise to Marlou that he would not take Gus until she got back. He couldn't wait much longer — things were getting too serious. Which meant that Wagner had high stakes in this game, which in turn meant that Marlou might be getting herself into who knew what up there in Denver.

When Marsh got home one evening and found Bill Goodhue at the house, he was mightily pleased. Bill was his best getter-of-things-off-the-mind.

" Hey," Marsh opened the exchange, " haven't you forgotten which twin has the permanent? "

" Squirrel food to you," retorted his pal. " This is a case of business before pleasure, or I'd have waited until next week."

" If that means you're here on business," said Marsh, " what's on your mind — hopefully speaking? Need the horse trailer? "

" Need you," Bill answered. " We got varmint trouble."

" Coyotes wouldn't be after cattle this time of year. What gives? "

" I'll be jiggered," replied Bill, which meant that he didn't know. " But the young steers we put up on the Taylor land in June won't stay there. Keep coming back down and crowding the home pasture gate."

" That's odd," Marsh commented. " Your lease carries about the richest grass I know of around here."

Bill nodded. " We've been pretty careful to always run a few head less than Mr. Ringland would allow. We figure something must be boogering the cattle of a night."

Marsh hoped it wouldn't be another mountain lion.

" I saw sign today," Bill went on, " which I took to be a bear. I wasn't just sure."

" Could be, I suppose," said Marsh. " I know there's a bear over above the Sloan place, but I'm not sure just how the Government goes after bear. Have to get out my instruction circulars and study up. Never thought I'd come to study, did you? "

" I hate to do this to you, chum," grinned Bill, " but we sure need to get those steers off our hands."

The next morning Marsh and Bill climbed their mounts to the summer pasture leased from the National Forest by the Ladder G under the Taylor Land Act. Bill led a pack horse carrying a twenty-pound bear trap on each side. From what Marsh had learned in his " homework " of the night before, he judged this was bear country, all right. Wild and rugged, it was heavily timbered with great firs, slanting upward to timber line, and then broke into a mighty chain of towering arctic cliffs that extended from Holystone to Cresta Blanca.

" It was right along here I saw the sign," Bill said presently.

Marsh nodded. " Let's have a look on that flat below the spring."

The ground was moist below the spring, and almost at once Marsh saw the sign. " It's a bear, all right."

Bill was impressed. " You're getting so you see an awful lot since you started on this job."

Marsh laughed. " If I was really sharp, I could tell you which way this bear was going, when it went past here, whether it was a he or a she, how old it was within a year, and the main ideas it had on its mind at the time."

" Oh, cut it out! "

" You ought to hear my boss read sign," Marsh boasted. " I admit I thought he was making up a story, at first. But when you follow through, it isn't even guesswork."

" Do you set a trap here? "

" Let's follow it a ways and see where it was going."

They set their horses to the upward plodding again, stopping frequently to let them blow. As they came abreast of the mouth of a small gulch, Oatbin snorted and shied. Marsh quieted the horse, reached for his rifle in the saddle boot in one motion, and faced the gulch.

" Listen," said Bill, " you're giving me the creeps. Smooth down your ear tufts and tell me what's going on."

" Strong bear sign," Marsh answered. " Get out your gun."

They rode gingerly forward into the heavily wooded little canyon. Quite suddenly, in a clearing, they stopped.

What they saw had been a half-grown steer. On a patch of undamaged skin above the hip they could read the Ladder G brand. The carcass was half eaten away. The entire front of the skull had been smashed in as if with a giant sledge hammer, and the neck was twisted grotesquely, broken in several places.

" O.K.," said Marsh. " You have one stock-killing bear, and here is where we set up for him. Let's go somewhere and eat first, because it reads like a considerable job."

They rode back to another of the innumerable high-country springs, washed up, and ate. Then they returned to the clearing and set to work.

With down logs and four stout aspen posts which Marsh cut, they built around the remains of the steer a sturdy pen, six feet high and four wide, perhaps ten feet in length. The bear's kill they left at one end, and at the other a doorlike opening. Just inside the door Marsh dug a shallow hole to bury the trap.

" Bruin barges in for the rest of his meal and puts his foot in it," said Bill. " Smart arrangement."

" I hope," said Marsh. " Help me with these clamps? "

They were perspiring freely by the time they got the great trap forced open, set, and covered lightly with loose earth and a few pine needles. Marsh secured the chain to a loose aspen pole ten feet long and six inches thick.

" Toggle," he explained. " Lets him tear around. That way he can't wring off. Also the trap teeth are offset."

" Kind of savage business," commented Bill.

" Not pretty," Marsh admitted. " But have another look at what he did to your steer, and you won't feel so bad. I'll come up every morning till further notice, so he won't be here long."

He tacked up a canvas sign conspicuously on the corner post of the enclosure. Bill, looking over his shoulder, whistled.

" ' Trap set for stock-killing bears,' he read. " ' A person caught in it could not liberate himself.' "

" Why I wanted you along," said Marsh, " though not liking to take you from your work. Instructions are never

to set a bear trap by yourself if you can avoid it. If one of those clamps slipped — "

The afternoon was far gone, so they headed for home. Marsh returned the following morning, but there was no sign that any animal had been near the set.

" Hope this won't go on indefinitely," he muttered to Oatbin as he turned back down the hill. " Going to give you a workout, feller, coming up here and back every morning."

He cut a wide circle to look for more sign, on the chance that he might find a better place for a trap. The mountain morning was a vast, sunlit silence, the breeze a sparkling cool riffle. Marsh rode with senses whetted, keenly aware of every sight, sound, and scent. This part of his work was pure joy.

Almost within sight of the Ladder G headquarters, and not five hundred yards from the pasture fence, he came upon another kill, another young steer smashed and torn.

Marsh rode quickly on to the ranch, but it was deserted. The men were no doubt off working the range somewhere, but with Mrs. Goodhue and Barbara gone, Marsh had no way of knowing where. He rode back and spent the afternoon building a trap pen. When he arrived at the house again, the men were just coming in.

" Bear made another kill," Marsh told Bill and Mr. Goodhue soberly. " How about setting that other trap first thing in the morning? I won't keep you from your work so long this time."

Mr. Goodhue answered: " Never mind that. Getting the bear's more important. Those steers are worth upward of fifty dollars apiece."

" See you early in the A.M., then," said Bill.

A mile from Chiricahua, Marsh met the Goodhue car,

with Mrs. Goodhue and Barbara returning from Denver. He waved and stepped hard on the jeep's accelerator, suddenly wild to get home and to know what, if anything, Marlou had learned.

His twin was in the middle of the living room, turning slowly about, with an admiring parent seated at each side.

" Hi, guy," she said as Marsh burst in. " I have news."

" Cryin' out loud," said Marsh, " give out." He moved packages from a chair and sat down.

" Isn't that a becoming suit? " Mom asked.

" Swell," answered Marsh, not even seeing what his sister was wearing. " Did you find the place, Marlou? Was it a dump? I've been kicking myself ever since you left for letting you maybe get mixed up with the underworld."

" Since you weren't together," Mr. Temple said dryly, " I figured the underworld had a sporting chance — after Marlou told me what it was all about."

" Empire Furs wasn't so bad," Marlou said. " Upstairs, and somewhat out of the way. The sign was ' Cleaning, Remodeling, Restyling, Storage.' Fortunately, I'd taken along Mom's old seal jacket, so I asked about having it restyled."

" Does that mean made over? " Marsh asked.

Marlou nodded. " The man was very smooth. He said the pelts in the jacket were too old to use again. Wouldn't I like to trade it in? He could make me a liberal allowance. I said I didn't think I could afford a new one."

" How true! " Dad agreed with feeling.

" The man said they didn't handle new garments. He brought out a coat he called ' wilderness fox.' I said it looked new, and he said, yes, didn't it? But since it had been worn, he could give me a very good price, and there would be no Federal tax."

" I don't get it," said Marsh. " Wagner charged us tax on the lion."

" Exactly what occurred to me. And I'd swear that coat had never been off the hanger. Yet the full price was eighty dollars, no tax, and it was just like new. He'd defy me to find another like it in town for less than a hundred."

Marsh pursed his lips: " Natch. The tax alone would make almost that difference. One dollar in five. Hey, you think tax evasion's the angle? "

" You had that thought once before," Marlou reminded him. " So why didn't I bring my father in? If he could only see me in this garment . . . Right then I got an idea that scared me. I said we lived out of town, in a little place called Chiricahua."

" Cryin' out loud! " breathed Marsh, on the edge of his chair.

" He practically strangled, and he couldn't get me out of there fast enough. Then all of a sudden I recognized him."

" Recognized him? "

" He bears a strong resemblance to Ivan Wagner."

" Marlou," said Mom, " are you sure your imagination — "

" No, really. His eyebrows grow together across his nose the same way. Same set of eyes and cheekbones. Same prissy way of handling things. And Ivan once told Marsh his whole family had been in the fur business for generations."

" Could be a brother," Dad agreed. " Ivan's not one to say much about his personal affairs."

" Still there's nothing incriminating to all this," Marsh observed gloomily.

" Wait," said Marlou. " I went straight to the fur department of one of the big stores. They couldn't show me a thing for less than $125. So I asked about ' wilderness fox.' The salesman had never heard of it."

" So? "

" From the way I described it, he said it sounded like coyote fur clipped and dyed — a very cheap fur that the standard houses never used any more except for an occasional trim or collar."

" Hey! " exclaimed Marsh. " Why, with coyote pelts bought for six bits or a dollar apiece, and not paying Federal tax — golly, there'd be big dough in a deal like that."

" I did the same mental arithmetic," nodded Marlou. " And while I was keyed up, I walked right down the street to the Federal Building."

Marsh leaped to his feet. " FBI? "

She shook her head. " I finally ended up with a man called a field investigator for a special tax court they have."

" I hope you didn't get over your depth," said Dad, worried.

" I don't think so. They didn't ask me to make any charges or anything. Just wrote down all I could tell them. They'll take it from there, and will let me know if I'm needed for a witness."

" Then they have your name? " said Mom, also worried.

" I wouldn't write an anonymous letter."

" She's a pretty rugged little citizen, Mom," Dad pointed out. " You have to admire her spunk."

" You can say that again! " exclaimed Marsh.

" Anyway," said Marlou, " it's a move against Wagner,

and the more I think of it the more I believe it's the only move we had."

"So now," Marsh reasoned, "I might as well take Gus."

"No use waiting any longer," his twin agreed.

"I'm sorry that has to be," Mr. Temple said with regret, "but I have no suggestions. All this dark business rather overwhelms me."

"Who'd have supposed," Mom sighed, "that Ivan would go to such lengths to keep Marsh from taking coyotes for the Government? I can't believe Gus would do what he has unless Ivan was backing him."

"When I started to campaign for Government hunting in the Basin," Dad told Marsh, "believe me, I had no thought of getting you involved in any such vicious plot."

"I got myself involved," said Marsh. "What it boils down to is whether I'm man enough to handle it. Get Gus combed out of my hair, and take that bear out at Goodhues'. If I can do those, I'll figure I'm qualified to be a Government hunter."

Next morning he left at sunup for the Ladder G. Bill was ready when he arrived, and together they set the trap.

"I'll ride on up to the other one," Marsh said. He couldn't tell even Bill why he was so eager and yet so reluctant to get back to town. The actual prospect of going to Sheriff "Uncle" Eph MacRae and asking him to arrest Gus filled him with a strange mixture of emotions.

The other bear trap was undisturbed, and the air of the little gulch was now rank with the odor of decaying bait. It was still early when Marsh got back to the ranch and loaded Oatbin in the trailer.

He might as well, he thought, still at odds with him-

self, still fighting off the return to town, take a look at his sets on the Irey place and the Sloan dude ranch while he was in the vicinity.

The cat traps at Ireys' were untouched. Marsh hurried on, wondering in spite of himself if Gus might not have got a sudden rush of brains to the head.

The hope was short-lived. Above Sloans' the traps obviously had taken four coyotes since he'd been there last, and not a carcass was to be found. Marsh returned to town with his teeth set hard.

" Never thought I'd have to call on you in my work," he told the genial old sheriff, and gave his story.

Uncle Eph tugged thoughtfully at his grizzled mustache. " I'll have to take a look at your evidence, Marsh," he said. " Then, since it's a Federal arrest, and you're the Federal Government agent who's involved, you'll have to go with me to serve the warrant."

" O.K.," Marsh agreed, " if I have to."

They rode out together to inspect the cut-bank where Gus had buried the coyotes and the old shack. At the shack they found half a dozen fresh tails. Getting the necessary papers in order took the rest of the day.

Marsh settled back in the sheriff's car next morning and tried to relax. It seemed so ordinary, in a way, this driving out the Geehaw Creek road, with a flare of vivid color behind Escarpment Ridge and the familiar dim shapes of landmarks flashing past. Uncle Eph was driving hard and occasionally coaching Marsh on what to say and do.

The Garver shack was drab and tattered, and the surly dog barked at them without courage.

" No back door, is there? " asked Uncle Eph as they got out.

" No," said Marsh, his solar plexus all at once a knot of distress.

Red Garver opened the door, leaning on his cane.

" We want Gus, Red," said Uncle Eph, and led the way inside.

Gus had just risen from his bunk, and stood there, clad only in his shirt, blinking sleep from his eyes.

Marsh said: " You're under Federal arrest, Gus, for robbing Government trap lines. I'm telling you anything you say can be used against you."

" Come along quiet, Gus," advised Uncle Eph.

" So! " Red Garver snarled at his son. " It wasn't enough you'd be no-count as a pocket in a shirt — you had to go crooked." The old man raised his cane. " You had to hang around that crumby Wagner till — "

" Will you be quiet? " rasped Gus. " They got nothin' on me if you keep your mouth shut."

" It's no matter, Gus," Marsh said. " I've trailed you to the cut-bank and the old shack."

Gus sank limply to the bunk and put his head in his hands. He said dully, " Lemme get my pants on."

" Better bring some extra clothes," said Uncle Eph, almost gently. " We'll be headin' right on for Denver. U. S. Commissioner's there."

Gus nodded. Marsh would have felt better if he'd raged and fought them.

They left, presently, in hard silence. Red Garver and his son had no word for each other at parting. Uncle Eph asked Marsh to drive as far as the courthouse and climbed in the back seat with Gus. The last thing Marsh glimpsed as he turned the car was Red Garver, hunched and bitter, staring after them from the doorway. He watched the sheriff's car out of sight from the courthouse lawn, and

then walked home for his own outfit.

He gave the family only the barest account, but they seemed to understand how hard words came. Marlou phrased it. She said, " Best if you go chase a bear now."

Gratefully, he went forth. He didn't want to talk to anybody. He circled the Goodhue house and rode directly to his first bear trap. It was empty, almost to his relief. He pushed on into the high country, and little by little its unchanging peace and vast quiet calmed his troubled mind. The upper trap was also empty. When he was almost back to the Ladder G, a voice hailed him. Marsh turned to find Bill riding toward him.

" You a cattle rustler? " inquired Bill.

" Not that I know of," Marsh said. " What gives? "

" You know how those stockers have been hanging around the pasture fence since the bear came. Wouldn't even venture out to good grass. Well, they've disappeared. Hoof, hide, and tallow. Sometime last night."

" Cryin' out loud! Hey, maybe the bear's left, and they headed back up to good pasture."

" That's what occurred to me, but I looked all over there. Not a sign of 'em."

Marsh pondered. " Well, let's trail 'em. A herd that size would be easy to follow."

" You would think of that right off," grinned Bill, " after it took me all morning to get around to it."

They rode down to the fence, and, after a brief look at the ground, Marsh said, " They went north." He reined Oatbin around. After some distance he added, " They were running."

" Going somewhere," Bill asked, " or just traveling? And how many mph? Might as well give me the whole story."

" Oh, lay off," said Marsh. He studied the tracks, and finally started Oatbin cutting back and forth across the main trail. " I hope I'm wrong," he added presently.

" What? "

" Bear was chasing 'em." Marsh gave Oatbin his head, and Bill joined in the full speed ahead.

Less than a mile farther on, Marsh pulled up abruptly. On the ground in the edge of a thicket was the bloody, mangled carcass of another steer. He stepped from the saddle.

" Dirty, mauling killer! " he burst out. " Why — " His companion was looking at him in surprise; it wasn't Marsh's way to go on like this. He stopped and sat with his back to a tree.

" I had to arrest Gus Garver this morning," he explained. Bill listened quietly, and it helped amazingly to talk it out with somebody. " I keep seeing Red Garver there in the door."

Bill nodded understandingly. " Feel lower'n the outside of a run-over heel, don't you? Well, there's parts of any job you don't like."

" At least," said Marsh, " you know you can do your job. I haven't even proved that yet. Here I'd rather help out you folks than anybody I know, and this bear keeps right on killing stuff."

" The summer's not over, Marsh."

" I've got two more bear traps at home," Marsh said, springing to his feet. " I'll bring 'em out tomorrow."

" And I'll go pick up this bunch of steers and drift 'em back this way," said Bill.

That evening after dinner Marsh called Mr. Killion on the phone and told of the arrest.

" You did exactly right," approved the supervisor.

" Sounds as if you have plenty of evidence, and the Service will be behind you all the way."

Marsh drew a deep breath. That helped. " And Mr. Killion, what about a bear that won't take a trap? " He explained his problem at the Goodhues'.

The supervisor asked, " Does he have any toes missing as if he'd wrung off from a trap sometime? "

" Nothing wrong with his feet." Marsh was sure of that.

" Might be a fresh-kill bear, one that won't eat anything except as he kills it. It's hard telling, unless you're on the scene. A man has to figure according to the circumstances. That's where these natural-born trappers glory in using their imagination."

Marsh said, " I see; thanks, Mr. Killion," and hung up.

He got the idea; he wasn't so dumb that he missed it. Mr. Killion meant it was time, if he had any gift for hunting, to prove it, to show he had imagination.

As Marsh turned from the phone, the doorbell rang. John Ledington was on the porch. The rancher came in, sat down in the living room, and opened conversation abruptly.

" I hear Gus Garver was arrested today."

Marsh said reluctantly, " He's been tampering with my trap lines off and on almost ever since I started this work."

" I feel the community's responsible, George," Mr. Ledington told Mr. Temple.

Mr. Temple said: " I feel the same way. It's one of those things that's everybody's business and nobody's."

" All conservation is that," said Mr. Ledington, " whether it's conservation of soils, or forests, or wildlife. And this is conservation — only it's human resources instead of natural resources. You and I must take action,

George, at once."

Mr. Temple was thoughtful. "Why you and I?"

"I have a boy and so do you. One of our greatest ambitions is to put those boys to the highest and best usefulness their abilities will allow. We can do no less for any boy we know, or we have failed our own boys by leaving them a waste area in the community where they will live."

"True," answered Mr. Temple, "except that you don't 'put' boys in their places, like seedlings in a forest. They have to find themselves, or they lose one of the greatest resources of all — self-reliance."

"You people talking about Gus," Marsh asked, "or me?"

Both men laughed a little. "A good question, Marsh," Dad said. "Matter of fact, I'm talking about you, and John's talking about Gus. Right, John?"

"In a sense, yes. Marsh can, and must, and will find himself. But Gus is a stray seedling that needs somebody to plant him in the right place. First we must get the community interested. Then you and I must go to Denver and see what we can work out with the U. S. Commissioner."

Mr. Temple rose and held out his hand. "All right, John, I'm with you. But what are we going to propose to the Commissioner?"

"That we'll have to work out," said Mr. Ledington as he took his leave.

Marsh went down to his den, knowing he would sleep better now that there was hope for Gus. His own hopes were pinned out of all proportion to those two bear traps out in the shed; if he failed with them, would he have to start all over again?

Bill was waiting for him when he arrived with the two extra traps. They spent the day setting them. Marsh fashioned the most cunning sets he could devise. The steer killed yesterday was dragged back into the bushes a little and the pen was built so that it could hardly be seen apart from the thick growth. He made it short, and very stout. The bait lay temptingly just beyond the trap.

He wished he could dispense with the pen altogether. It might be that the bear was afraid of an enclosure. But the law was very strict that no bear trap be left in the open where a person might accidentally step into it, and Marsh knew that a hunter breaking any game law wouldn't stay in the Service.

The days dragged on and he took no bear. His tally of coyote scalps mounted rapidly now that he, and not Gus, was getting the prey. Yet before he could feel any encouragement because of this, the Goodhues lost another steer.

" I guess we'll have to bring the stockers down to the feed lot," Mr. Goodhue decided. " Can't turn them into the meadows on account of the growing hay, and we can't use up our winter pasture this summer."

" And they can't stay up on the Taylor land," Marsh said dismally. " I'm sure sorry. We might fix up the fourth trap with this last steer that was killed. It's only baited with rabbits now."

Mr. Goodhue agreed. " It's hard to believe that it could be so important to take one wild animal."

" But it is important," said Marsh. " To me too."

Mr. Ledington arrived at the Temple home with the daylight, chuckling about city folks who slept until noon.

" How does it look for Gus? " Marsh asked.

" As good as we can expect, I think," answered the

rancher. " I had a talk with Red."

" How was he? "

" At first hard as nails and twice as rough. But when he caught on that I wasn't passing out blame, and he didn't have to keep up a front to me, he ended up talking real sensible. He wants to do right, far as he's able."

" That will help with the Commissioner," Mr. Temple predicted.

The two men departed for Denver, and Marsh set out on his work.

The traps were empty again. He had rather expected that, for his bear seemed to kill only every two days. But the tension was wearing at his nerves, and the sight of Bill wielding a hayfork at the feed lot didn't help any. When he returned empty-handed again the next day, Bill said, " Maybe he's left the country."

" I doubt it," said Marsh, " but I'll hunt sign tomorrow."

That evening Mr. Temple returned from Denver.

" What about Gus? " Marsh and Marlou demanded with one voice as their father entered the house.

" He's at home," Dad answered. He paused to kiss Mrs. Temple. " It was a tough fight, Mom, but we won."

" Do tell," begged Mom.

" Gus is paroled to John and me. The Chamber of Commerce and the Land and Livestock Owners are backing him, out of some of their funds, and he's to be set up in business."

" What's he to do? " asked Marsh.

" Fishworms," Dad chuckled. " Did you know it really is a business, and a good one? "

" You mean people make a living digging fishworms? "

" It's more than that. There are ways of cultivating

them scientifically. The Commissioner put us on the trail of the necessary information when we explained to him what we felt Gus's abilities are. You never saw anybody so enthusiastic as Gus."

" Bless his heart! " Mom murmured.

" Do you suppose he'll make any money? " asked Marlou.

" He will if he works," Dad predicted. " It's to be called the Garver Hunting and Fishing Service. Besides the fishworms, he'll tie flies, and outfit and guide hunters and fishermen. The Chamber of Commerce is going to give him a spot in their tourist advertising."

" Well, cryin' out loud! " Marsh was fervent.

" Dad, I think you're wonderful! " dimpled Marlou.

Dad's hand rested on her shoulder. " How's it going with you, Marsh? "

Marsh shook his head. " Guess I don't have what it takes to be a first-rate hunter."

" You have the south wall of the chicken house practically covered with coyote scalps," said Marlou.

" Routine stuff. Anybody could learn that."

" Then why does only one apprentice trapper in ten make good? " asked Dad. " That's a figure either Mr. Killion or Woody gave me."

" Must be a kind of sixth sense," Marsh said. " Something comes up like this bear out at Goodhues', not covered by the book, and the guy with the gift figures out what to do."

" I think you've had an unusually difficult assignment," Mom said loyally.

" Well, it's manual labor, a lot of it, and smelly. I don't suppose much future to it, either. Maybe I'd better study the college bulletins again. Ought to be something I'd

be suited to."

" We'll figure on it again," Dad promised, " if you decide that's what you want."

" That's not what I want," Marsh answered, " but — " He let it drop there.

How could you explain that a bear, a dumb brute, a wild and unreasoning animal, held the key to your future? The folks couldn't be expected to see why that Goodhue bear had come to mean the difference between success and failure.

Early as Marsh arrived at Goodhues' next day the ranch had an air of having been long astir. He stepped from the jeep, puzzled.

" Brother, what a night! " Bill offered without preamble. " Bear got into the feed lot about two A.M."

" Into the feed lot! " Marsh was appalled.

" Really raised hob, mister! We heard the racket and tore out down there, but before we could cover that three hundred yards afoot, he got six."

" Six steers? "

" They're sure not pigs."

Marsh hurried to the rail-fenced enclosure. Sprawled across the hoof-chopped earth were the torn carcasses of six young steers.

" This the way you found 'em? " Marsh asked.

" We haven't moved them," answered Mr. Goodhue, who had joined them, " in case you wanted to look at the ground. The rest of the herd have stayed crowded against the opposite side as you see them now."

They were lowing nervously and snuffling the air and the earth.

Marsh climbed down inside the fence.

" It was sure the bear," Bill told him. " Got a glimpse

of him as he ran. Nothing else could be that big, or travel that fast."

" Get a shot? " asked Marsh.

" Yes, but I missed. It was starting to cloud up."

Marsh hadn't paid much attention to the weather, but now he noticed that it was, indeed, overcast and chill. He straightened and turned to the Goodhues.

" This was an accident, in a way," he said slowly. " The bear piled in and made one kill. Then you came running out, which scared him. The steers were stampeding every which way. The bear felt cornered, and slapped his way to the fence. Every slap brought down a steer."

" Some were still kicking when we got here," Mr. Goodhue said.

Marsh squared his shoulders with an air of finality. " Bill," he said, " you want to go bear-hunting? "

" Brother! " exclaimed Bill.

" Get a horse, and let's take enough food for two or three days. Plenty of ammunition."

" What's your thought? "

" That bear didn't get a bite last night. He may have been kicked and trampled some. I'm hoping he may be hanging around up there — " Marsh nodded toward the cloud-hung mountains — " hungry and sore and just mad enough to be a little careless."

" You figure to track him down? " demanded Bill.

" And stay out till we get him."

Preparations took but a few minutes. As they mounted, a spatter of icy rain pelted them. The gray mass of cloud hung just at the treetops, with occasional wispy streamers trailing along the ground. Such weather often comes to the high country in late July or early August.

" You fellows watch yourselves," Mr. Goodhue warned.

Bill grinned and patted his rifle. " We'll ride with these across our saddles."

" Nix," grunted Marsh. " Stick it in the boot and keep your slicker skirt over it. We want it dry when we need it."

They rode away, and within a quarter of a mile the ranch buildings sank from sight below them in the wet fog. After that there was nothing but dim trees, the slick trail, and gray silence except for the muffled squeak of saddle leather and the faint clink of snaffle or spur chain.

As soon as they crossed the Goodhues' west line, Marsh led the way, eyes on the ground to watch for bear sign. They stopped to blow the horses and went on again, the fog and the quiet getting thicker as they gained altitude.

" Gives me the creeps," Bill complained after a while, his voice a bit hushed.

" Keep your gloves on," Marsh ordered, almost absently.

" Why? "

" Want your hands warm if you need to handle a gun."

" You needn't get crabby. Weather got you down? "

" Not the weather," said Marsh; " this bear. Seems to me, Bill, if I can't take this bear, after the losses you folks have had, I might as well quit. It's a question of whether I can come through when the going gets tough."

" I hate putting you on the spot," Bill answered, but he seemed to find nothing else to say.

The morning wore on, gloomy and wet. The youths were not too uncomfortable in their slickers except when occasional bursts of rain lashed at their faces. The horses kept warm with the climbing.

They came to the first trap Marsh and Bill had set.

The trail Marsh was following led into the little gulch. They moved in cautiously.

" He's been here," Marsh said excitedly. " First time he's ever sniffed around a trap, Bill, and he's not more than two or three hours ahead of us."

" Let's go," said Bill.

" We still may have a long siege ahead. Better eat."

As they sat in the doubtful shelter of a dripping fir, Marsh said, " Bill, have you definitely settled your plans for this fall? "

Bill nodded. " Colorado A. and M., animal husbandry. When I get through there, back to the Ladder G."

" Wish I knew my own mind as well."

" Wish you were going with me," said Bill. " If I make blocking back on the football team, I'd like to have you slicing along behind me."

" If this bear gets away — " Marsh rose and swung to saddle again. It was no day to loaf under a tree after lunch. They slogged along stubbornly through the afternoon.

It was near three o'clock when they lost the trail. The bear had mounted into a boulder field, and even if the horses could have climbed it, there would have been no tracks.

" Guess that settles that," Bill remarked. " I've been thinking: we ought to go back to the ranch and let the stockers out. Give 'em at least a chance to run for it."

Marsh turned Oatbin. " I expect you're right. He'll try again tonight, being still hungry. Only we've got no way of knowing when, where, or how."

" Won't have to wait for night," grumbled Bill, " in this fog. He could be within a hundred yards of us right now and — "

Both horses reared violently and whirled. Marsh had a glimpse past Oatbin's head of a vague, running shape.

" Oatbin! " he barked, and clamped his knees.

As the palomino jarred to a halt, Marsh fired. The shape went tumbling out of sight in the gray mist.

" Wow! " said Bill, awed. " Seventy-five years ago you'd have been marshal of Tombstone, with a draw like that."

" Moved without thinking," Marsh answered, " or I'd have realized it was only a porcupine." He leaned low from the saddle to pick up the glove he'd dropped. " Why couldn't it have been the bear? "

" It could," Bill retorted. " In which case Juke and I'd have been halfway home by now."

They rode forward and made sure. The porcupine was dead, the carcass shattered by the heavy charge from Marsh's three hundred. With his trowel Marsh scooped the remains into a thick bush.

" So someone won't get a noseful of quills," he said. " Bill, if there was only some way to make that bear come to us."

The irrepressible Bill said, " I could stand in some likely spot and moo, while you covered me with a rifle."

Marsh cried: " That's it! You've got it, guy! "

" Hey," sputtered Bill, " don't be — "

" Listen," said Marsh, " have you got a late calf on the place, a runt, or some critter that's not very valuable? "

" Always do," Bill answered. " Say, you mean live bait? "

" That's what I mean." Marsh was grim. " It's a rough deal, Bill, but you know how desperate the situation's getting. You folks are taking the losses. Got the stomach to stay with me? "

" I'll get the calf," Bill answered promptly, lifting his reins. " Where you want it? "

" At the upper trap," said Marsh, gratitude in his voice. " I'll buy — No, don't tell your dad about this, Bill. If we lose the calf, I'll pay him for it, but I'm doing this on my own. I expect if the Service, or the Cruelty to Animals people, ever heard about it, my name would be mud."

" I don't want to lose you your job."

Marsh shook his head. " If I don't take the bear, I'm washed up anyway, as I told you. Mr. Killion said to use my imagination."

Two hours later Bill joined him at the trap pen. Across Bill's saddle lay a scrawny, unhealthy-looking calf. Marsh had rebuilt the bait end of his pen into an extremely stout, covered shelter for the calf. The trap remained cunningly concealed in the pen's doorway.

Together they got the struggling calf placed in the pen and wired down the heavy roof logs. Immediately the hapless animal let out a long and mournful " Baw-w-w! " The sound gripped at Marsh's vitals as he mounted Oatbin.

" Let's get out of here," he said thickly.

" He's got a chance." Bill made an attempt at comfort. " He can run if the bear tears down the pen, which won't be any small chore."

Marsh said nothing. They let the horses pick their way, for the mountain was already thick black, the cold a clinging, numbing blanket.

" Quit fighting yourself," Bill ordered. " Sure it's cruel. But what about those steers the bear's smashed down and left wallowing in blood? Some of these anti-steel-trap folks ought to get a load of that, and they'd not waste so

many tears on the poor hounded predator."

The far wail of the penned calf carried to them again, faint with distance. Marsh pulled Oatbin to an abrupt stop.

"I can't take it, Bill," he confessed. "I'm going to wait here."

"Oh, fine!" snorted Bill. "Now I *am* going to turn you in for cruelty to dumb animals, and I don't mean that calf."

But he was dismounting as he spoke. They unsaddled, folding the saddle blankets under the saddles to keep them dry.

"Do I hear you taking off Oatbin's bridle?" Bill's voice asked from the gloom. "Everybody at the ranch will be scared to death if he shows up without you, providing he doesn't become bear bait on the way."

"Oatbin will stick by me," Marsh answered, "and Juke will stay with Oatbin. Let 'em graze without bridles."

"Can't we have a fire?" Bill wanted to know as they fumbled in their saddlebags for food.

"Bear might scent it."

They opened cans by feel, and chewed a cold snack of sardines and rye bread. Marsh struck a match and looked at his watch.

"Seven thirty," he half groaned. "Going to be a long night."

"I hear a spring right over there," said Bill. "Want a drink of nice cold water?"

"If you weren't such good company," Marsh responded, "I'd poke your nose."

They had to keep moving, swinging their arms and stamping their feet against the soaking chill. Minutes

dragged into hours, the silence pierced only by the mournful, maddeningly regular bawl of the calf.

" Wouldn't you think he'd run down? " Marsh muttered once.

" Ought to be around when we wean 'em sometimes," Bill told him. " I've heard 'em holler for three days and nights steady."

" I'll be counting needles on the pine trees if this keeps up for three days," Marsh predicted.

" You could," Bill pointed out, " have gone into some respectable kind of work like a newspaper."

" Thanks," said Marsh. " I need a reminder that there's no excitement in a two-column ad, at least not for me. Still, if this thing fouls up — "

Somehow the night passed. Blackness thinned to dark gray, eventually, but there was no cheer in being able to see each other stumbling about, leaden-footed.

Suddenly Marsh snapped, " Listen! "

Bill stopped short, and then, " The calf's stopped bawling! "

They grabbed their rifles from under cover, and, as they turned, the calf's noise broke out again, this time a wild cry of sheer brute panic.

Ignoring the snorting horses, the two ran, tearing across the mountain as hard as they could pound. Abruptly a harsh roar shredded the fog. They dashed into the gulch, stumbling through the trees, heedless of the steep rise.

Marsh burst into the clearing a step ahead of Bill. He heard a thunderous roar, and had one terrifying glimpse of gleaming fangs and charging bulk coming at him through the fog. Without thought he jerked the rifle to his shoulder and fired.

The black shape went over backward, violently, full

length on the ground. Marsh marveled briefly at his own shooting. Then the bear came up again, towering on powerful hind legs. Marsh saw his trap on a front leg. The long chain held to the toggle log, which had caught between two trees and had yanked the beast over backward.

The twenty-three pounds of cold steel seemed no more burden than a wrist watch.

The bear tugged wildly at trap and chain, then dropped to all fours, his snarl shaking the canyon as he slashed, slavering, at the trap. Marsh followed his movements with leveled rifle, seeking a shot at the point just above and behind the ear.

For a second the bear paused. Marsh centered his sights, held his breath with an effort of will, and squeezed the trigger. The bear went over sidewise with a shuddering crash.

Marsh leaned weakly against a tree and looked at Bill. His tall companion was still covering the bear with his own rifle, drops of moisture showing against the pallor of his face.

" Baw-w-w! "

" The calf! " gasped Marsh. " Cryin' out loud! "

They ran unsteadily up to the pen. Slabs of bark half the size of a saddle had been ripped from the logs, but the pen was still standing. They loosened wires feverishly and made an opening.

" Baw-w-w! " The calf came tearing through like a bony wraith, and within seconds disappeared in the direction of home, tail high and voice resounding.

Marsh and Bill leaned on the remains of the pen. Then, steadied, they walked gingerly across to the bear, rifles at the ready as a precaution.

" No need," said Bill, lowering his weapon. " He's got

a hole in the head. But, boy, what a bruiser! "

Marsh drew his knife. " This scalp," he said simply, " means more to me than any trophy I've ever taken."

By the time they got their horses, sprang the other traps as a safety measure, and reached the Ladder G proper, the morning was nearly gone. The horses plodded wearily, and the boys rode slack, hipped sideways in their saddles, hunched against the cold and wet.

" You've proved you're a hunter, Marsh," Bill said.

" Hooray," Marsh said heavily. " Remind me to celebrate when I wake up. About day after tomorrow."

" Oh, I feel fine! " grunted Bill. " I ate yesterday. Or was it the day before? "

" Hey," said Marsh, " what's our car doing in your yard? Didn't I remember to ask your mom to phone mine? You suppose — "

" I'm no good at guessing games," Bill said, " till I've had my morning coffee." He gave Juke a touch of spur, and they pounded down the trail.

People came to the porch at sound of the horses. Marsh recognized his father among them.

" What's up, Dad? " Marsh asked, letting himself stiffly to the ground. " You didn't — Mr. Killion! "

" Hello, Marsh." The supervisor smiled at Marsh as the boy mounted the steps. " Your family didn't know when you'd be in, so they very kindly brought me out here. I was getting ready to start after you."

Marsh didn't speculate on what Mr. Killion might have said had he found the calf in the pen.

" It's much better you came back," Diane Ringland said from the door. " We all wanted to be in on breaking the news."

" News? " Marsh rubbed a hand over his tired face,

wishing he'd had a shave.

" Ivan Wagner was arrested last night," his father told him.

" Arrested! " Marsh and Bill exclaimed together.

" The Internal Revenue men established a case of both income and excise tax evasion against the Wagner brothers," Mr. Killion explained, " thanks to the lead you and your sister gave them."

" I told you," said Marlou, " that that fur man in Denver had a resemblance to Ivan Wagner."

" You two look completely worn out," Mrs. Temple said anxiously.

" Yes, do come in," urged Mrs. Goodhue.

" I'll get the coffee, Mrs. Goodhue," offered Diane. " Don't tell the rest for a minute."

Marsh sank down at the table, trying to clear his exhausted brain. He lifted the steaming drink Diane poured and drank gratefully.

" What do you mean," he asked the girl, " ' the rest '? "

" I notice a bear scalp on your saddle," put in Mr. Killion.

" *The* bear scalp! " Bill declared. " Cost us ten head of stock, and no telling how much more if Marsh hadn't got him."

" A fresh-kill bear," Marsh explained to Mr. Killion. " After you told me to figure the case out according to circumstances, I changed bait, and we got him, just at daylight."

He'd done the thing on his own responsibility. He'd decided against putting Mr. Killion in a position of being asked to sanction something that might be against regulations.

Mr. Killion nodded understandingly. " You've got the

makings of a hunter, Marsh. I'd like to see you get ahead. Would you want to go to the Wildlife Management School at Colorado A. and M. College this fall, if I recommended you? "

" That's the rest of it," laughed Diane.

With difficulty Marsh regained his breath. " Cryin' out loud! "

" You better mean ' Yes,' " cried Bill. " You realize we can start college together, guy? "

" You'd be working for us summers," added Mr. Killion.

" So the money can be managed," Dad spoke up.

" Cryin' out loud! And would I be a full-fledged trapper when I got out? "

" More than that," answered Mr. Killion. " You'd be headed for a career in the Fish and Wildlife Service, with the training to merit promotions as you go along."

" A career," Marsh breathed. " You get that, Brain? And, hey, it's not so far from Fort Collins to Boulder but I could jeep over to see you some week ends."

" O.K.," dimpled Marlou. " But no help with homework except in history and English."

" Not even that," Marsh returned stoutly. " I can study my own self, no kid. I know now what I'm after — I mean I've found out — Aw! " He gave it up and propped his weary head on a hand. " I could sleep for a week," he finished in peaceful drowsiness, " and dream beautiful dreams the whole time."

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